



SAN PAOLO

OFFICIAL HOUSE BULLETIN OF THE SOCIETY OF ST PAUL

“To Progress Ever More”

Letter of the Superior general

Year 80 – No. 417 – March 2005

LETTER OF THE SUPERIOR GENERAL

“To Progress Ever More”

Dear brothers,

As you know, the first working guideline of the topic, “Spirituality and Community Life” approved by the 8th General Chapter establishes that *“The Superior General shall, every year, continue proposing to the whole Congregation a programmatic theme for our spiritual and apostolic life by drawing it from the Letters of St. Paul and from the writings of Don Alberione”* (cf Final Document 1.1.1. in *To Be St. Paul Alive Today. Reflections and Documents of the 8th General Chapter*, p. 222).

To realize this working guideline and to allow continuity to the programmatic theme of the Chapter: **“To Be St. Paul Alive Today. A Congregation that strains forward”**, for this coming six years I deem it important as well as useful to propose to your prayerful reflection the letters that current studies attribute with certainty to St. Paul. I will treat them following their most probable chronological order of writing: the first letter to the Thessalonians; the first and second letter to the Corinthians; the letters to the Romans, the Galatians, the Philippians, and to Philemon.

1. The *reason* for our reflections on the *Letters* of St. Paul is given to us by our Founder himself: “Children should resemble their father. All the friends of St. Paul must look up to him and know his spirit. The more the letters of St. Paul and his life are read and penetrated, the more one loves and enters the true way of sanctity and the true spirit of the apostolate” (*Vademecum*, n. 631). That is, *let us merit and be worthy of the name that we bear!* To call ourselves *Paulines* means to declare ourselves disciples and faithful imitators of St. Paul in living our faith in Christ and accomplishing our apostolic mission.

2. From other texts of blessed James Alberione we can clearly see the *pregnant meaning* of the presence of the apostle Paul for our

Congregation and for the whole Pauline Family. He wrote during the 40th anniversary of our Congregation: “The *Pauline Family* resolves to represent and live St. Paul today, thinking, zealously working, praying, and self-sanctifying as St. Paul would do today if he were living... He made himself the *Society of St. Paul*, of which he is the Founder. It is not the Society of St. Paul that chose him, but he chose us; he even gave us birth: ‘*In Christ Jesus through the Gospel I bore you*’.

If St. Paul were living, he would continue to burn with that twofold flame, with that same fire of zeal for God and for his Christ and for people of every nation. And to make himself heard he would ascend the highest pulpits and multiply his message through the instruments of modern progress: press, movies, radio, television... Know and meditate St. Paul: his life, works, and letters; thereupon to think, reason, talk, and work following him and invoking his fatherly help” (*San Paolo*, Oct. 1954).

On another occasion, he explained: “Everything came from the Eucharist which is the life of the Pauline Family. But it was handed over by St. Paul. From the Eucharist because Jesus is life himself, but the holy Bread needs to be carried if it is to enter our hearts. And it was St. Paul who accomplished this work of communicating the life of Christ... Everything is his. The Institute was inspired by him. He is its father, its light, its protector, its teacher, its everything... The Pauline Family, composed of many members, must be St. Paul living today, in a social body” (*Vademecum*, n. 651).

3. Upon explicit direction of the Founder, the meditation and vital assimilation of the *Letters* of St. Paul must inspire with the same intensity the work of *personal sanctification* and *total dedication to the apostolate*. St. Paul as “the most profound interpreter of the divine Master, who applied the Gospel to the nations and called the nations to Christ and whose presence in theology, morals, church organization, adaptability of the apostolate and of its means to the times is very much alive and substantial” (*San Paolo*, July-August 1954), is for us Paulines the *model of (necessary) balance* between contemplation and action.

4. As we know, the *Letters* of St. Paul are not always easy to understand. Hence, to make our reading of them profitable, it is necessary to use the instruments we have at hand, like exegesis and hermeneutics, and bearing in mind the interpretation made by Fr. Alberione for the Pauline charism.

The purpose of *exegesis* is that of helping us to understand the biblical text to determine its meaning in its own historical and cultural context.

After the Vatican II Council, thanks to the contribution of many sciences and human disciplines, exegetical studies have had a progress on the international level. An excellent synthesis of the state of exegetical research is contained in *L'interpretazione della Bibbia nella Chiesa* (The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church), published by the Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993); a successive updating is found in *Atti della giornata celebrativa per il 100° anniversario di Fondazione della Pontificia Commissione Biblica* (2003) (Acts of the day celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Foundation of the Pontifical Biblical Commission).

The *interpretation* given by Fr. Alberione of the person and *Letters* of St. Paul is for us Paulines the first means of reference to understand the application he has made of it to the Pauline charism; in fact, without reference to St. Paul, Pauline charism would be unthinkable. Proof of it is, at the start of the Society of St. Paul, the continual connecting of St. Paul and the Press Apostolate often done when mentioning a phrase attributed to the Archbishop of Magonza, Msgr. Wilhelm Ketteler: “If St. Paul were living today, he would make himself a journalist”.

The results of exegesis and interpretative mediation for Pauline charism must be subjected to an hermeneutical reading. For clarity, we can say thus: while studies in exegesis help us to understand the meaning of a passage from St. Paul in its historical context, *hermeneutical reading* asks the original meaning of that passage starting from the problems of today of society, culture, ecclesial community, communication, and Congregation so as to assure that Pauline charism, on one hand, be *founded* in St. Paul, and on the other, accomplish *today* with *dynamic fidelity* to the will of the Founder, inspired by God and approved by the Church, the apostolate of communication.

5. The text that I now submit to your meditation – the *first letter to the Thessalonians* – adheres to the criteria mentioned above. You will find there the exegetical explanation, the interpretation of Fr. Alberione, the application to today's complex reality wherein as Paulines we are called to act.

The laying out and exposition of the arguments aim to be easily read and understood by all. Of course, those who have more solid knowledge in exegesis, hermeneutics, and Pauline charism are invited to put their talents at the service of other Paulines for further deepening.

I add that the present study does not pretend to be exhaustive; it is rather to be considered as a *testimony* that intends to activate a process of deepening and enriching, with the addition of diverse contributions after the text has been meditated and assimilated by every Pauline. This will result such that personal *prayerful reflection* on the basic text, by mobilizing the faith and intelligence of all who love our wondrous charism that cannot be lived without the centrality of St. Paul, broadens into *communitarian sharing*, shared “re-writing” of the discoveries of each one.

This sharing and collective exertion, tending to let grow both individuals and community, has also inspired for me the title, “*To progress ever more*” borrowed from a verse of the same letter (4.1).

THE FIRST LETTER TO THE THESSALONIANS

I. INTRODUCTION

For every biblical text there is an historical, cultural, religious, and social context that has caused it. Knowing this context is of great importance for the understanding itself of the text because it allows us to avoid readings that are out of context, pietistic, or fundamentalist. Hence, before going into the text of 1Thes, let us know something about the city of Thessalonica, the founding of the Christian community, the profile of its Christians, and the letter they have received from Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy.

1. The city of Thessalonica

The founding of Thessalonica took place in 315 B.C. through the effort of Cassander, one of Alexander the Great's generals. It is the main city of Macedonia and uses a commercial and military port to export mineral and farm products that comprised two of the great riches of Macedonia. It became the capital of Macedonia in 146 B.C., year of the inauguration of the Ignatian way, a Roman road that, passing from Thessalonica, joined Rome to Asia Minor.

We can imagine the internal and external commerce of the city. The streets and the port allow the exportation and importation of merchandise from the whole world. To give lodging to persons coming from all parts of the world with their own culture, tradition, and religion, the city can depend on a basic infrastructure (pensions, locales, saunas, theaters, public plazas, sanctuaries, brothels...). In the fields are cultivated grapes, olives, and fruits in general; sheep are raised, but the lands are in the hands of a few owners (landlords). From the sea many fishermen extract food for shipowners, traders, sailors, soldiers, officials, inspectors, masons, headmasters, carpenters, iron workers, a multitude of persons without work, and vagabonds (Acts 17,5) who make a living starting riots.

Thessalonica is a city with a hybrid population. The causes of this racial mix are many, among them the constant movement troops, merchants, and preachers of beatitude recipes. The city harbors Italian groups and oriental Syrians as well as Egyptians and Jews (who have there a synagogue, cf Acts 17,1). Our big metropolises that have become cosmopolitan cities help us to better understand how Thessalonica was. In brief: persons from all over the world were in this city searching for survival. Every ethnic group carried its own culture, language, and belief. All of this must not have rendered easy the acceptance of Paul and Silvanus as announcers of Jesus Christ and, even worse, as preachers with wounded bodies, whose preaching meets with strong opposition (cf 1 Thes 2,1-2) on the part of the Jews (2,15-16, Acts

17,5ff). Then add the existence of philosophical schools (Stoics, Cynics) who are not always well-intentioned or clear in their motives (Sophists and others; cf the transparent behavior of Paul and his companions in 1Thes 2,2-6).

This reality arouses interest where religious phenomenon is concerned, creating a fusion (and confusion) of divinities. In the first place, the cult of the Roman emperor (cf Acts 17,7), strong in the city. The oriental propensity to divinize kings (and emperors) has taken root even in the Roman empire. In Thessalonica there traces of a temple dedicated to Julius Caesar and of a priest of Augustus, the "son of God". Cities like Thessalonica that stuck to the cult of the Emperor received from the Roman Senate big material benefits (money), making it such that opposing the divinization of the Emperor meant serious consequences. It meant blocking the progress and well-being of the city, clashing against the ideology of "pax romana" that guaranteed "peace and security" (cf 1Thes 5,3) to the whole empire.

Secondly, in Thessalonica the cult of Dionysius is widespread. Originally, he is the god of vegetation, then he became the god of wine and drunkenness. It seems that some of the recommendations in 1Thes 4-5 (4,3-8; 5,7-8) concern this cult, beside the theme of waiting for the future life (cf 1Thes 5,1-11).

Independently of the powerful presence of Judaism in Thessalonica, a hint must be made of the importance of the cult of the Egyptian god Serapis (Osiris). Among his varied functions was that of guardian of the lower world and source of all life and healing. Besides leading us to what today we call inculturation, this shows how strong were the Egyptian cults in this city.

Other divinities were present and enjoyed cult in Thessalonica like, for example, Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty. We can imagine even now the difficulty for Paul and his companions to communicate and transmit messages in the pluralistic and syncretistic ambience of this city. The letter shows that the effort of Paul and his companions had a positive outcome: the Christians of Thessalonica left their idols and put themselves at the service of the living and true God (1Thes 1,9).

From the political point of view, Thessalonica is under the jurisdiction of the Roman empire and is governed by an elite (politicians, magistrates, and the military), aided by a council (called *demos*) which makes the laws and decrees (1Thes 5,12-13 talks of guides who worry for the city, proving that Paul has a totally different vision of power). It is very probable that nobody among the Christians in the city took part in these higher circles, even if Luke mentions about some women in high society who are members of the community (Acts 17,4; see below, n. 3). However, we can imagine the impact of some recommendations of Paul to persons who had never been listened to or have had the power of decision; recommendations like that in 1Thes 5,21: "*Test everything; retain what is good*".

Beside the ruling elite, there is in the city a kind of *middle class*, made up basically of public officials (inspectors and tax collectors; one must not forget that Rome exacted heavy taxes), pensioned soldiers, architects, and others. But the majority of the population is poor. In Thessalonica we find many slaves and dockers. They did not make decisions, therefore they were not considered people. According to the thinking of the time, it was impossible to go up socially because the system privileged the great potentate and he, as always, does not admit descents in the social ladder. Besides this, we must remember that according to Greek culture only slaves submitted to manual and heavy work. Take note, even now of the behavior of Paul the worker and what he advises to the indolent (5,14). It is necessary, moreover, to bear in mind that it is the first time that Paul writes a letter to a community, calling it *ekklesia* (church, community, family). This word calls to mind the Hebrew *kahal* (gathering of the people of God). Calling these poor Thessalonians *ekklesia* meant recognizing their status as citizens.

2. Foundations of the community

To talk about the rise of the Christian community in Thessalonica we shall make use both of indications from Luke (Acts)

and from those of Paul in the letters he has written, even if in some details Paul and Luke do not agree. We shall not dwell in the discussion of details. We shall rather give more importance to information coming from Paul.

We are in the year 50, during the second missionary journey of Paul (Acts 15,39–18,22), accompanied by Silas (Silvanus), Timothy, and probably Luke. The most important note of this journey is the entrance of the Word in the continent of Europe through the city of Philippi and, after that, Thessalonica. Luke does not tell us of the fact that at this point Rome had already received the message. For him, Paul is a pioneer and trailblazer, and from this missionary impulse Europe is about to receive the first announcement of salvation. The events in Philippi are known due to the account of Acts 16. Writing to the Thessalonians, Paul simply says that in Philippi “*we have suffered and we have been insulted*” (1Thes 2,2a). Luke writes lengthily about these happenings. We suppose that the evangelizers arrived in Thessalonica still showing the wounds of the scourging they suffered. Instead of feeling shame, they are full of *audacity* (Paul in 2,2 uses the word *parresia* = audacity, to show bravery, to dare) and announce the Gospel of God amidst great struggles. Paul does not give us details of these “great struggles”, but using a little imagination and with the help of Acts, we can put together the picture. **1.** Competition among the preachers of beatitude who profit from human frailty and exploit the people (1Thes 2,3-7). **2.** Conflicts with Jews of the city. They are envious because Paul pulls away from them “the adorers of God” (Acts 17,5ff). They persecute him violently (1Thes 2,15-16; 3,4). **3.** The social condition of Paul, who allies himself with the poor and the slaves, working with his hands (4,11; 2Thes 3,6-12) night and day (1Thes 2,9). **4.** Political tension with the Roman empire and imperial cult. The charge against Paul is that of subversion: he announces another king, thus transgressing the decrees of Caesar. (During his passion, Jesus suffers a similar accusation, Lk 23,5; Jn 19,12).

Notwithstanding this hostile environment and Paul’s and his companions’ fragility, in spite of the *tribulations* the Thessaloni-

ans and even the evangelizers suffer (1Thes 1,6), there rises in Thessalonica through the impulse of the Holy Spirit a *joyful* Christian community.

3. Profile of the Christians in Thessalonica

Acts 17,4 talks of women of high society who take to heart the teaching of Paul. If we believed what Luke says, we would have in Thessalonica a community where economic (and political) power sits at the top of the social pyramid. However, it’s worth remembering that Luke creates on his own many scenes in Acts concerning Paul, allowing us to doubt his information. Some years after having started the Christian community in Macedonia (Philippi and Thessalonica), Paul challenges the Corinthians to help the poor Christians in Jerusalem. He says that the communities in Macedonia, though poor and undergoing *tribulations*, have been willing to help *with great joy*.

It is then spontaneous for us to ask: who of the two is right concerning the social condition of the Christians in Macedonia, Paul or Luke? It’s clear that we have to give credit to Paul in uncovering the poor side of the communities in Macedonia, unless we identify the elite mentioned by Luke as the lazy ones cited by Paul in the letter, a theme that returns with force in 2Thes.

Following the indications of Luke concerning the composition of the Christian community in Thessalonica, we run into the phenomenon of ethnic and cultural pluralism. In the story of the founding of the community (Acts 17,1-9), Luke shows Paul who meets the Jews in the synagogue of the city. The result of announcing Jesus Christ in the course of three Sabbaths is this: *some Jews* became convinced and allied themselves to Paul and Silas (17,4). It is the first ethnic group that composes the community. It seems that the Jewish Christians of Thessalonica were a minority.

Surprisingly, also a *multitude of worshipers of God* accepts Paul’s announcement and embrace the faith. *Worshipers of God* were all the non- Jews who believed in the God of Israel and were will-

ing to accept a certain number of moral prescriptions of Judaism. This group is the most consistent in the community, and undoubtedly the *worshippers of God* had been attached to the synagogue. This accounts for the fierce revolt of the Jews of Thessalonica against Paul and Silas.

The third group that will make up the cultural and ethnic diversity of this community is that of *many Greeks*. This detail is important because the Greeks did not come to the synagogue as *worshippers of God*. This means that Paul must not have limited his preaching to the synagogue, but has searched for “other pulpits” for the transmission of the message. This third group makes it that the Christian community be a bearer of new things, distancing itself from Judaism that was known to separate neatly the races, thus creating a dividing wall (cf Eph 2,1ff).

Paul calls these persons of different ethnicity and culture *ekklesia*. The word, according to the thought of Paul, can have several meanings: assembly, church, community, *family*. There is in Thessalonica a very diversified *ekklesia-family*. The state that makes all of them common is that of *brothers* (1,4; 2,1.17, etc.). Paul is both mother and father (2,7-12). It was certainly Paul who introduced to the early Church this form of treatment among the members of a community: *brothers*.

4. The first letter to the Thessalonians

We do not know how much time Paul remained in Thessalonica. Certainly, his stay there was not only for three weeks. The fact is, he founded a local church, a new family – perhaps in Jason’s house – and gave it a basic organization, appointing also some animators (1Thes 5,12-13). The community – or communities – of this city (like the other communities founded by Paul) was small in number and gathered in a house.

In Thessalonica, hatred against Paul (1Thes 2,15-16) increased and he had to flee to save his life. He took refuge in Berea (Acts 17,10). Meanwhile, persecution continues in Thessalonica, by this time against the community (1Thes 2,14). The evangelization

of the community in Thessalonica remained incomplete. Many things were still lacking. Even in Berea tensions provoked by the Jews of Thessalonica arise and Paul is led to Athens (Acts 17,13-15). And it is he himself who explains his state of mind in that city: “*That is why, when we could bear it no longer, we decided to remain alone in Athens and sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one be disturbed in these afflictions. For even when we were among you, we used to warn you in advance that we would undergo affliction, just as has happened, as you know. For this reason, when I too could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had put you to the test and our toil might come to nothing*” (1Thes 3,1-5).

As Timothy goes to Athens, Paul tries to talk about the risen Christ to the intellectual elite of Athens. This was a failure. In truth, nothing more will be said, whether in the Acts or in the letters, about this city. Frustrated and embittered, Paul goes to Corinth (Acts 18,1ff) and works with his hands as two thirds of the slave population of that city. A short time after happens what is told in 1Thes 3,6-10: “*But just now Timothy has returned to us from you, bringing us the good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us and long to see us as we long to see you. Because of this, we have been reassured about you, brothers, in our every distress and affliction, through your faith. For we now live, if you stand firm in the Lord. What thanksgiving, then, can we render to God for you, for all the joy we feel on your account before our God? Night and day we pray beyond measure to see you in person and to remedy the deficiencies of your faith*”.

It is the start of the year 51. In Corinth, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy write to the community. They overflow with thanksgiving to God and exhort the community to grow in faith, love, and hope. (Some scholars see in 1Thes two letters written at different times. We shall not go into these details). The tenor of the letter is characterized by a *before* and *after* trip of Timothy to Thessalonica and his return. *Before*: 3,1: *That is why, when we could bear it no longer* (in Greek, *me stegontes* denotes anxiety, an ex-

treme situation); *after*: 3,8: *for we now live* (literally: *alive*). It is death-life, death-resurrection.

We can therefore sum up the reasons why this letter has been written: the good news brought by Timothy that speaks about the *active faith* of the Thessalonians, the *love* that they have for each other and for Paul as to make them feel a mutual longing for a return encounter; the *unshakable hope* that animates the life of the community. Timothy must also have brought some reasons for worry. Hence, Chapters 4 and 5 contain exhortations for the community. Paul writes troubled about the still weak faith of the Thessalonians (1Thes 3,10). He makes this known both in his letter and his future visits that will be possible for him to make in Thessalonica.

5. Importance of the letter

It is the first written document of the New Testament. In Corinth, at the start of the year 51, 20 years after Christ's resurrection, the first book of the NT is born. It is a collective letter: Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy – in that order. Even if the figure of Paul stands out, this letter is the result of six hands and three hearts. But it will not always be like that. One who is interested in this theme (somewhat arid and technical), will discover that little by little Paul has abandoned the first person plural in order to use the "I", notwithstanding that in the initial presentation of the letter he is accompanied by other persons.

Take note of a detail: at the time of the Pauline letters there is yet no written gospel in existence (Mark's gospel probably appears in the year 68). In the meantime, Paul is not afraid to speak explicitly of "Gospel".

Another significant detail: as the first written text of the NT addressed to a majority of non-Jews, 1Thes challenges us in the question of dialogue with culture. We must not also forget that Paul in writing has created a new means of evangelizing: the letter. He did not stop at traditional means (preaching and direct catechesis), but has innovated, making himself present through writing where he cannot personally go in person.

The first text of Paul also serves to show the development of his thought. Precisely for this reason shall we study in depth his letters, following their probable chronological order. Besides that, it is important to be aware even now that Paul's letters are not speculative or theoretical writings, but texts that touch the daily affairs of persons and communities. They are texts that are deeply pastoral and tied to life as it is lived.

II. THE LETTER AND ITS PRINCIPAL THEMES

The letter is built on a triad (it's the first time that it appears in the NT) that we know as the "theological virtues" and are the pillars on which the Thessalonian community is built: faith, love, and hope – in that order. And each of these virtues is described: faith is active, love is capable of sacrificing itself, and hope is steadfast: "*Calling to mind before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and endurance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ*" (1,3). These three themes are not neatly marked off, probably because of difficulties in writing and dictating the texts.

Except for the address, introductory greeting (1,1), and the final greeting (5,28), the letter has two big sections. The first includes the three initial chapters and the second, chapters 4 and 5. The first section (1,2–3,13) is characterized by the *thanksgiving* that Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy raise up to God in their prayers for the good progress of the community. We can see this in 1,2 ("*We always thank God for all of you...*") and in 3,9 ("*What thanksgiving can we give to God regarding you...?*").

In 4,1 we can clearly see a change. The theme of thanksgiving to God in joy disappears and *exhortation* directed to the life of the community arises. "*Finally, brothers, we ask you and exhort you in the Lord Jesus...*" This exhortation lasts practically until the end of the letter.

In the first section we see a Paul who suppresses the desire to talk about himself to give way to thanksgiving for the community. Therefore, it is this situation that determines the first three chapters.

1. “We always thank God...” (1,2–3,13)

a. Activeness of faith (1,4-10). In a climate of continuous thanksgiving (“*uninterruptedly*”, v. 3), the letter develops the theme of “the active faith of the Thessalonians”. How did this happen in the founding of the community and after the departure of the missionaries? It’s because of their acceptance of the Word with the joy of the Holy Spirit in the midst of many trials. The trials were the persecutions the community faced after the departure of Paul (cf 2,14). For the Thessalonians, persecution was the thermometer of their faith. They have resisted in an exemplary manner as to become imitators of Paul and of the Lord, and people talk about this up to Achaia (where Paul is while he writes). Secondly, the active faith of this community was noted for its diffusion of the Word, such that the Thessalonians themselves became missionaries. Observed last but not least in importance was their conversion from idols to the service of the true and living God, in the hope of the coming of his Son.

The active faith of the Thessalonians brought about denunciation and rupture: they had to abandon their idols, denouncing them as sources of slavery and death. It’s not just a matter of changing religion, since in 1,9 we find the frontal clashing, as of two irreconcilable things, between the idols that cause death and the true God who stimulates life. Adherence to the living God involves rupture from whatever generates death and a permanent commitment to life that is born of God and takes root in a just and fraternal society. It is neither easy nor romantic to pass from commitment with idols to adoration and service of the true and living God. This passage can cause suffering and persecution.

Suggestions for a Pauline reading: In a climate of thanksgiving to God, **1.** read the story of your vocation and the journey of your community (“*We know well, brothers loved by God, that you have been chosen by him*”); **2.** consider the importance of the word of God as nourishment for each of us,

for the community and as seed that we sow in the culture of communication; **3.** bear in mind that for St. Paul and for the Thessalonians life that is lived (testimony), announcement of the Word, and tribulation are clearly connected realities; even more, despite trials, the Thessalonians are happy because of joy in the Holy Spirit; **4.** the active faith of the Thessalonians made them missionaries beyond their boundaries. What importance has this fact for us? **5.** We live in a society that is full of idols of every kind, many more than were in Thessalonica. Media does not cease to foment idolatries. What does this mean for us? **6.** Active faith, a love that is capable of sacrifices and steadfast hope are the pillars upon which the Thessalonian community is built. Besides the evangelical counsels, what are the “pillars” of my community? **7.** Faith, love, and hope roughly correspond to the Alberonian triad of mind-heart-will. What does this mean for us? **8.** There is in this pericope a discreet presence of the Trinity. As an exercise, we can take note of what **Paul** says of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **9.** For the first time, in the writing of Paul, the theme *ekklesia-family* and the word *brothers* appear. What importance has this for us?

b. Image of the evangelizer and active faith (2,1-19). The first impression that we have when we read Chapter 2 is that the act of thanking is lost. In truth, however, it is the focus of the text, between the conduct of the missionaries (2,1-12) and the welcome that the Thessalonians reserved for them (2,13-19): (“*And for this reason we too give thanks to God unceasingly, that, in receiving the word of God from hearing us, you received not a human word but, as it truly is, the word of God, which is now at work in you who believe*” (2,13).

Ahead of this verse we have a picture of the pastoral worker, whose principal characteristics we emphasize bearing in mind the hundreds of preachers who were fooling the people of Thessalonica. **1. Audacity.** Still showing the sufferings and insults received in Philippi, Paul and his companions are filled with *parresia* (audacity) to announce the Gospel. **2. Transparency.** Paul does

not flatter his hearers who can discern his uprightness. When that is not possible, the evangelizers bow down to the judgment of God who sees and scrutinizes. **3. Love capable of sacrifices.** Paul could let his rights as an apostle prevail and demand that the community support him materially, but he does not have recourse to this right. **4. Motherly tenderness.** Paul compares himself to a mother who not only nourishes and caresses her child, but is capable of giving her life (cf Jn 15,13; v. 1Thes 2,7 can be translated in various ways). **5. Fatherly firmness.** According to the cultural paradigms of the time, it was the father's responsibility to do in such a way so that his son becomes a citizen. Hence the verb of v. 12: to exhort, to encourage, and to implore.

To receive the word of God, the Thessalonians had to receive the poor and suffering, that is, Paul and his companions as messengers of the good news of the Kingdom. If they had not accepted Paul and Silvanus, the word of God to Thessalonica would have gone by without being perceived. This is because the word of God comes to us in history, through events, and through persons who are not always elegant and rich. The theme of persecution returns in the letter (2,14-16), strongly worded, and Christians are put on the same level as the churches of Judea, of the Lord, and of the prophets. This a sign that their active faith and unyielding hope have influenced their journey.

Suggestions for a Pauline reading: In a climate of thanksgiving to God, **1.** compare your life as a Pauline with the marks of the Apostle just shown to you; **2.** review the purposes of our consecration and mission, what is it that we are looking for; **3.** the world of communication is a field characterized by interests that are not always clear. Does what we say (our message) always corresponds to what we think and live? Paul says anything to us about this? **4.** "It's good to be important, but it's more important to be good". Paul does not hesitate to steer away from the standard behavior of his time, comparing himself to a mother in dealing with the Thessalonians. How are our relations with our community and how do

we treat the recipients of our message? **5.** Paul considers himself as both father and mother of the communities he founded, proving that there is a fruitful fatherhood that is not physical. Does this reality suggest something to us? **6.** What does this pericope suggest to us beside what has been said?

c. Active faith and a love capable of sacrifice (3,1-13). The theme of active faith continues in Chapter 3 accompanied by that of love capable of sacrifices. The authors of the letter are anxious and are sleepless because of the possibility of seeing all their evangelizing work ending in vain. The theme of "tribulation" appears again. This is a technical word in the Pauline letters denoting the pressures and oppression that swoop on the pastoral worker in a context of tension and conflict. Hence, the state of his mind and that of his companions: (*"Not being able to resist anymore..."* (3,1), even if verbally he had warned the community about the tribulations that their mission would have implied.

This aspect is interesting and very contemporary. The first text of the NT puts together mission and tribulation, evangelization and persecution. Mission takes place in a field of interests contrary to the project of God. Paul shows this when affirming that there is a "Tempter", an adversary who can cause missionary work to be useless. Without going deep into the question, this theme makes us think of the mystery of evil and of the struggle Christians do to oppose good to evil.

Timothy goes to Thessalonica with these worries and returns with good news about the *faith* and *love* of the Thessalonians (3,6). The active faith of the community, capable of resisting persecution, has cheered up Paul and his companions; and this is reason for them to thank God. We can see in 3,6-13 a climate of love that seals all relationships: love among the members of the community and outside of it. *"May the Lord make you grow and abound in mutual love and towards all, as we too are towards you"* (3,12). Active faith has caused departure from idols to serve the true and living God and the concrete sign of this faith was the creation of the Christian community whose unifying force is love that knows no boundaries: the members of the community

love each other mutually and pour out this love to the outside in loving all persons. Love between the missionaries and the community looks for new encounters: “...*desirous of seeing us as we are of seeing you*” (3,6b). Paul desires that these future encounters become occasions for deepening the faith.

Suggestions for a Pauline reading: In a climate of thankfulness to God, **1.** call to mind trials you have overcome, your relief after moments in which you have felt like Paul (“*Not being able to resist anymore...*”) and the joy of seeing your big and small apostolic projects succeed; **2.** Pauline mission does not end in a book, video, CD, or others (“...so as to complete what is still lacking in your faith”); we must be creative and courageous. Does this suggest something? **3.** The love of the Thessalonians for each other and for Paul is the result of their active faith. In abandoning their idols to serve the living and true God, the Thessalonians have formed a community, resolving to create new relationships among themselves, making the community a place wherein a plan for a new society is crafted. Are our communities fraternal? Is the climate there different from that of the competitive and exclusivist society wherein we live? **4.** Paul detects “*the mystery of evil*” (the Tempter) between the message transmitted by the evangelizers and its recipients. Go deep into this theme, remembering the Founder: counter the bad press with the good press...

2. “...we beseech you and exhort you in the Lord Jesus...” (4,1–5,27)

The exhortative part of the letter begins. It’s neither made up of impositions (laws coming from the outside) nor of simple advices that can be rejected. In the big city of Thessalonica there arose a core group of Christians who have accepted the challenge of leaving their idols to serve the true and living God. This change has brought about some consequences: **1.** The community, in spite of its small size, in living the novelty announced by Paul and his companions, becomes a transforming ferment in

the big city; salt of the earth and light of the world according to the Sermon on the Mount; a new dough without the ferment of iniquity (cf 1Cor 5,6-7), according to Paul’s words. **2.** If the Christian community in its internal opens the door to unjust and oppressive customs and relationships that encircle it, it ceases to be a ferment. Paul becomes furious when this happens, for example, in the communities of Corinth. **3.** The community, then, is the bearer of an *ethos* (ethics), a new behavior that illumines and ennoble all relationships within and outside of herself. This is the sense of the phrase “children of the light” in 5,5.

In the luggage of Timothy, who goes to meet Paul and Silvanus in Corinth, there are not only good news. Until now we have seen the bright side of the Thessalonians. In fact, Paul started his letter talking about good things regarding the community. Now, because of these advices for a Christian ethic in the big city, we can glimpse that the ferment of an unjust and unequal society was threatening to contaminate communitarian relations. Hence, the advices in the letter that roughly continue until the end.

a. Love capable of sacrifices (4,1-8). The letter starts affirming that the Thessalonians who almost all are pagans, belong to the number of God’s elect (1,4). Thus, the barrier of race is overcome. Then the reason of this election is shown, that is, the will of God: “*your sanctification*” (4,3).

If the letter asks and exhorts on the matter of sexuality it is because the conduct of the “*Gentiles who do not know God*” (4,5b) has perverted rapports within the community. The phrase “*one’s spouse*” (v. 4) can also be translated as “*one’s body*”; at any rate, we find out that Paul intends to treat a sort of theology of the body (or of sexuality, or of marriage) that he develops in other letters (e.g., 1Cor).

To understand the novelty of the message, it’s enough to remember that for Greek culture, matter (the body) deserves mainly contempt and is destined for destruction. As a result, there is just one outlet for the human being: make use of, exploit, even if this

means oppressing another person. Christian ethics affirms that the body, destined for resurrection, is the means by which we come into relation. The body (and sexuality) has been created for relation and its last destiny is sanctity. This truth makes all human relations new: the person with herself, with others, with creatures, and with God.

Suggestions for a Pauline reading: **1.** God wants our sanctification, and this is a continuous process. Blesseds Giaccardo and Alberione both say that the Pauline apostolate is a journey, the journey of our sanctification. Without it, the Pauline does not sanctify himself. **2.** Care for one's body and respect for the body of others proves that I love myself and others. **3.** Our hedonistic society often disfigures the body of persons created according to the image and likeness of God. As followers of Paul and spreaders of the Gospel, we must have another perspective, another theology of the human body, through which we create communication and communion with persons. Do I see these themes "*like the Gentiles who do not know God*", or as a carrier of a good Pauline word? **4.** Relate the text to the vow of chastity. **5.** In our big Family we have the Institute called Holy Family. What do I know of it and what do I do for it?

b. Love capable of sacrifices (4,9-12). Paul's letter praises the love that circulates among the members of the community and outside of it ("*in all of Macedonia*"). However, since love is a dynamism that does not close itself and never stops, Paul advises to progress ever more in that direction. And as a practical person, he immediately goes to the concrete, that is, he shows how to translate this love in the every day. There were in Thessalonica persons who burdened the community, living a lazy life (perhaps rich persons not accustomed to work, or persons who, believing in the impending return of the Lord, had stopped working and lived in fruitless wait). The letter exhorts these persons to work with their own hands, thus making two things happen: stop being a burden to the community (internal aspect)

and become an example of a life worthy of honor for people outside (external aspect).

Suggestions for a Pauline reading: **1.** Love is a duty that never runs out nor does it make us run out. We shall never reach the summit of fraternal love: "*But we exhort you, brothers, to progress ever more*". At what stage am I in the commandment of love? **2.** In the cultural milieu of Thessalonica, only the slaves did manual work. Work therefore discriminated on persons, created classes, and was exclusivist. Does this have repercussions in our communities? **3.** By working with their own hands, the Thessalonians became an example for "those outside". Does this inspire the employer-employee relation in our Congregation?

c. Steadfast hope (4,13-18). The initial catechesis of Paul certainly included the theme of parusia, or the second coming of the Lord, as an impending fact. This must have aroused the expectation of some in the community, some of whom had stopped working. Others lived in despair, because some of their loved ones died before the parusia and therefore could not meet the Lord.

Paul's message starts with talking about hope (4,13) and with asking for mutual comforting (4,18). Even in this aspect, the community is a bearer of novelty that leavens the entire society: "*We don't want you to remain ignorant, brothers, about those who have died, so you don't continue to be afflicted as those who have no hope*" (4,13). The central axis of Christian hope is the death and resurrection of Jesus (a theme developed in 1Cor 15). During the parusia, both the living and the dead will enjoy full communion with the Lord.

d. Persistent hope (5,1-11). The letter now talks about "when" the parusia will take place. It sets aside all certitude, repeating what the community already knows: the second coming of the Lord is not predictable. The only certainty is that he will come without warning. The image of the thief at night is meaningful and if on one hand it outlaws any speculation, on the other it

shows the only possible mindset: vigilance. In other words, a *persistent hope*. This theme sounds the same in the Old Testament and even in Jesus' preaching. The contrast between darkness and light emphasizes what the letter wants to impress on the community: Christians are children of light, act at daytime, and are bearers of novelty even in the field of hope. They are compared to a soldier who is well-equipped and ready for the coming of the Lord. And his weapons are well-known: faith, love, and hope.

Suggestions for a Pauline reading: 1. Active faith leads us to stay away from idols to serve the living and true God. The response of active faith is the formation of communities that live new relationships within and without its ambience, relationships that are characterized by love. Living in this way, communities look with hope to the future and toward what is beyond their personal and collective history. What place does hope have in my life and in the life of the community? Does the Congregation have a future? Are there signs of hope? Do I inspire hope, or am I "*like the others who have no hope*"? 2. Years pass by and I ready myself for my final encounter with the Lord. How does hope enlighten this preparation? 3. The Pauline Family in heaven becomes more and more numerous. Like the Thessalonians who did not stop loving their beloved dead, let us also continue to love our brethren who have preceded us in the journey of eternal life. 4. Paul erred concerning the second coming. How do you accept this? 5. For a Pauline, what does *vigilance* mean? being a *son of light*? Paul talks of a soldier who is well-armed and well-equipped. Does this also apply to the Pauline?

e. *Love capable of sacrifice and firm hope* (5,12-27). The petitions and exhortations continue and it's difficult to gather them around some common themes. Our attention is called by the exhortation that "consideration" and "special love" should be had for "animators" (5,12-13). Of them it is said that they *fatigue* in their *work* for the community. Besides telling us that there was a modicum of

organization, the letter allows us to glimpse how Paul considers the service of authority and the response the members of the community give to whoever guides them "in the Lord". To "fatigue oneself" is the same verb used by Paul to talk of his difficult every day work (1Cor 4,12; 15,10; Gal 4,11; Phil 2,16).

After various exhortations (5,14-22) that reveal other shadows in the community, the letter ends with a desire in the form of prayer (5,23), picking up again the theme of *hope* in the day of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Suggestions for a Pauline reading: 1. How is my relation with authorities "*who fatigue*" in our midst: systematic criticism, servile adulation, or "*special love*"? 2. Reflect on the vow of obedience. 3. In 5,14-15 Paul offers some directives concerning fraternal correction. How does this affect me and my community? 4. Does the text suggest to me other things? 5. What have I learned deeply reflecting 1Thes?

III. THE LETTER IN FR. ALBERIONE. CONSEQUENCES FOR US TODAY

1. How has Fr. Alberione read and interpreted the first letter to the Thessalonians?

Making use of the writings of our Founder, we can highlight some of his reflections drawn from this letter of Paul. I briefly call them to mind.

1.1. In 1967, the 19th centenary of the martyrdom of the Apostles Peter and Paul, the Father Founder traces a synthesis of 1Thes in these terms: "In Thessalonica (Salonica) St. Paul had founded a flourishing Church, according to the Acts of the Apostles. 'With the power of miracles and manifestations of the Holy Spirit: St. Paul affirms that his preaching in Thessalonica was such in its results and in spiritual charisms that it caused the full conversion of all the Thessalonians'.

Driven away due to the intrigues of the Jews, St. Paul wrote this letter to encourage the Thessalonians and he praises them for their perseverance, their zeal for the Gospel, and their fervor in the midst of persecutions. He is sad because he cannot return. After the reports given him by Timothy who had visited them, St. Paul became consoled.

In the second part he exhorts to sanctity, charity, and work. He alludes to the end of the world.

In particular, he reminds them about duties toward ecclesiastical superiors, the brethren, and God. Also to live according to the spirit for the day of eternal reward. 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you' " (*San Paolo*, Dec. 1966).

1.2. St. Paul's affirmation: "*Because this is the will of God: your sanctification*" (1Thes 4,3) is cited many times, and at times simply suggested by Fr. Alberione in his writings and meditations to the Institutions of the Pauline Family as a true program for the whole life. It's a sanctification that finds in Christ the Divine Master Way, Truth, and Life the unique and irreplaceable model: sanctification is a gradual Christification of the mind, heart, and will.

Saint Paul, who presents himself to the Thessalonians as a "model" for how to live and please God (cf 1Thes 4,1), is indicated by the Father Founder as the "form" for the sanctification of Paulines. Pauline perfection is a unity of "sanctification and apostolate"; it's a dynamic unity because it's called "to strain forward, progressing a little every day".

1.3. One theme in the letters to the Thessalonians that Fr. Alberione regularly underlines is *laboriousness* (cf 1Thes 4,11 and 2Thes 3,7-13) as a virtue to oppose to laziness and to support by others. After having said that "St. Paul was a great worker", he comments for the Paulines: "The work of the Pauline (Priest and Disciple) has a special quality: Jesus the Worker in his work produced inexpensive things; St. Paul produced military mats; on the other hand, the Pauline is engaged in a direct apostolate, giving the truth with his work, doing a work of predication that

has become a mission and one approved by the Church... Work brings us closer to God, who is pure, infinite, and eternal act. The more man passes from potentiality to act, the more he imitates God" (*San Paolo*, Jan. 1954).

1.4. Paul's reminder to the Thessalonians that they *tend to sanctity* (cf 1Thes 4,3) gives reason to Fr. Alberione to talk about the content of the Pauline apostolate and to indicate the editorial standard for lives of saints and biographies: "But God's holiness, as revealed in the person of the Word incarnate, is so sublime as to dismay. If, instead, we see it reflected and, as it were, dissected in people about us who have the same hardships and face the same struggles that we do, then holiness appears easier and more accessible... This is how the apostle is to present the saints for imitation. He must not side with those writers who portray the figure and virtues of the saints to such an exceptional degree, and so far above us as to make them appear as superior beings from the moment they entered this world. And, once departed, they make them appear so distant as to be discerned only by means of a fleeting haloed image, assumed as they are into the heaven of their glory and out of reach... To succeed in showing how God's grace works in unison with the saint's human striving and to the precise degree that he or she takes up this task, you have to sense and have others sense the link between the saint and this world" (*AE*, 269-271).

1.5. In St. Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonians, "*Pray without ceasing*" (1Thes 5,17), Fr. Alberione shows the regular practice of daily meditation as a form of constant prayer: "But how can we pray continually and at the same time attend to the duties of our state? Is not this impossible? There is no difficulty, for to succeed we need: 1) to put into practice our exercises of piety; 2) to transform our everyday actions into prayer. Habitual recollection prepares our union and also our transformation in God: a conversing with God, each day ever more intimate and affectionate, which goes on during the course of the day, even in the midst of our occupations" (*UPS*, II 59, note 5).

1.6. Fr. Alberione's references to 1Thes that we have followed in this rapid review have, above all, the value of showing some basic themes dear to our Founder and that have guided his personal life as well as his founding activities. Moreover, they lead us to a documented and deepened research to evaluate the impact of St. Paul in the thought and works of Fr. Alberione.

2. Consequences for us today

Desiring as Paulines today to interpret our charism in society, in the Church, in communication, and in the contemporary reality of our Congregation in the light of the message of 1Thes, I believe that we can highlight principally the following themes.

2.1. As we know, 1Thes is the first written work of the NT and it was the merit of St. Paul to introduce the use of the *written word*, in the form of a letter, to carry out preaching. Here we find the remote origin of what is *specific in our charism* in the Church which through divine inspiration blessed James Alberione has codified in the key value of **predication**, first through the press, then through subsequent forms of mass media and today through multimedia communication and the internet. We are not just a simple Catholic publisher. We are models of a new style of apostolic life and of a new manner of evangelization. Starting from 1914, the Pauline charism is a "revolution of mentality and pastoral method".

2.2. The epistolary communication of St. Paul takes place in a context of "continuous prayer". St. Paul prays while thanking God for what happened during his encounter with the inhabitants of Thessalonica. St. Paul's example as proposed and codified in exemplary manner by Fr. Alberione in the *Manual of Prayers* is a model we can refer to for **our prayer**, understood as a fruitful intertwining of prayer full of action and of action full of prayer.

2.3. St. Paul's letter highlights the *totality of the evangelization process* in Thessalonica: the call of God to the pagans, the role of collaborators of the Gospel, the generous response of the Thessalonians who abandon their idols, assimilate the example of the Apostle and become models of faith, hope, and charity while also resisting persecutions. From idolaters, the Thessalonians become believers. From being disciples, they become models of Christian life.

At the start of the 3rd millennium, John Paul II in his apostolic letter *Novo millennio ineunte* (2001) has mobilized the whole Church to find again "the (evangelizing) thrust of the origins" (n. 40). In this context, attached as it is to the action of the Church, the Pauline apostolate is called to a dynamic fidelity towards the Founder who has entrusted to it the work of using for the Gospel "the fastest and most efficient means" of every historical epoch.

Since communication today has become a complex phenomenon that concerns private, social, and international life to the point of transforming itself into a true and novel culture, Pauline charism cannot limit itself to the adoption of new means of communication. Loyalty to the Church demands from us courage to **rethink in communicative key the totality of the process of evangelization**: God's will in calling all and always to salvation, the personal and communitarian role of Paulines called to preach in a new way, the receptive capacity and the true response of today's recipients, perseverance in making ourselves "everything to everybody", knowing how to unite in evangelical work the traits of "mother and father", that is, the tenderness and firmness that St. Paul teaches us.

2.4. The total involvement in the evangelization of Thessalonica described by St. Paul spurs us to recover and meditate on the constant invitation of Fr. Alberione to observe with supernatural eyes **fatigue in the "work" of evangelization**.

Without supernatural inspiration, the great quantity of work and constant organized laboriousness demanded by our apostolate easily becomes a mechanical activity that can even end up as a simple employment.

In the pastoral of vocations during novitiate and in the various stages of formation, it is necessary to present and let assimilate the **almost sacramental value** of the means and structures of the apostolate and of the necessity of labor. It is necessary to show in a faithful and convincing way the many reflections of the Founder on Pauline laboriousness that has in the 30 years of the hidden life of Christ and in the manual work of St. Paul models to imitate.

2.5. The quality of the faith of the Thessalonians as it is shown by St. Paul can be a reference for the goals of spiritual perfection of the Paulines. The constant **integral vision** of Pauline formation inculcated by Fr. Alberione has legitimate foundations in our letter: Christian life characterized by faith, hope, and love; to continually make progress; to be children of the light and of the day; to put on the armor of faith, hope, and charity; to examine everything and to keep what is good; to strengthen all of one's being in God, etc. The reminder to "make better" what is already good (1Thes 4,1.10) merits emphasis.

2.6. The faith they have received changes the habits of couple relations the Thessalonians had when they were pagans. Following the style of St. Paul who offers to his interlocutors the Christian vision of the body and sexuality, the Pauline apostolate – valuing the suggestion of the Founder to "not always talk of religion, but to talk of everything in a Christian way" – must improve the work of making known, understood, and grow in **public opinion** those Christian values that characterize individual and social life. The pluralistic environment in which we are called to live commits us to an elaboration of the Christian ideal that takes into account not only the recognized problem of orthodoxy, but also the culture of the recipients.

2.7. St. Paul's explanation about the fate of Christians who die before the coming of the Lord in glory can be taken up by us, making reference to Fr. Alberione's habit of frequently calling to

mind the **last things**. How does what Christian faith says about death, judgment, reward, or eternal punishment affect Pauline charism? Surely, it's not a matter of exhuming classical works about death or cultivating a taste for the macabre, but of anchoring our life to a meaning of faith on the origin, development, and conclusion of our existence.

2.8. St. Paul talks about **community life** as a result of faith, a gift of God, and as a human response. Pauline community life "stems from the apostolate and in view of the apostolate" (UPS, I 285). The recommendations given by St. Paul in 1Thes (cf 4,9-12) aim to build a community that through its internal life, gives testimony for the outside, thus acquiring a missionary dimension.

In 5,12-22 the Apostle exhorts respect for the service of authority, to live in peace; exhorts fraternal correction, lifting up of hearts, patience toward all, to do good, to give thanks, to not extinguish the Spirit, to test all and to retain what is good. If she leans on these values, the Christian community lives by the power of the Spirit and becomes an instrument of its action in history until the parusia.

2.9. In 1Thes St. Paul shows several times the **objective of preaching** realized not by mercenaries or because of material interests, but by "God's helpers" (3,3). Although the announcement is done by men, it is the word of God that has as effect the dynamism of sanctification in the one who accepts it as such. Those who have been "made worthy by God to be entrusted with the Gospel" must give a complete evangelization: not only announcing the truths of faith but offering themselves as examples of that faith: "You have become imitators of us and of the Lord" (1,6).

For Pauline preaching to be efficacious in a supernatural way, it cannot be cut off from the quality of the spiritual life of the apostle of communication. Fr. Alberione's recommendations leave no doubt: passion for apostolic mission is proportionate to intimacy with Christ the Master, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

IV. STEPS FOR A PAULINE READING OF THE LETTER

1. Initial requirements

- a. Better if in community (1Thes 5,27; Col 4,16);
- b. Consider it as the word of God (1Thes 2,13);
- c. Take it as the Word for our times (1Cor 10,11; Rom 15,4);
- d. Take it as the Word that forms us completely (2Tim 3,16-17; Gal 4,19);
- e. Let it guide us till Christ live in us (Gal 2,20).

2. Things to pay attention to:

- a. Avoid improvising. Prepare beforehand;
- b. Avoid picking out isolated phrases and out of context. A **suggestion:** follow the division of the pericopes used here (one pericope for each encounter);
- c. Avoid spiritualism, divorcing prayer and mission, so as to be coherent with Paul and our charism.

3. The Pauline “method”

- Way, Truth, Life = mind, will, heart = dogma, morals, cult... trinomials of integrality, the whole man (cf 1Thes 5,23).

3.1 **First step:** *Lectio* (Reading) → Truth: *What does the text in itself say?* SEE.

Read the passage (pericope) several times, with attention, surprise, and novelty (this can be done as remote preparation); it is a study exercise. The explanation that we have given can serve as an aid.

3.2. **Second step:** *Meditatio* (Meditation) → Way: *What does the text say to us, to me?* JUDGE.

Ponder, compare, connect with the present. The text today, for me, for my community, in my country, continent; in this globalized world, in the media, in the culture of communication, etc. How can I be St. Paul living today? After each pericope find the “Suggestions for a Pauline reading” and the entire Part III of this letter is directed to this.

3.3. **Third step:** *Oratio/contemplatio* (Prayer/contemplation) → Life: *Transform everything into prayer/mission.* ACT.

Thank, ask, praise. How? Spontaneously (prayers, hymns, selected psalms... Phil 4,6; 1Cor 14,26; Col 3,16 etc.). *Important:* don't improvise, like: *Let's go to say the Vespers... or the Rosary...* Prayer must be the crown of *Lectio divina*. It cannot be cut off from “being the living St. Paul today” and from “talking of everything in a Christian way” in a culture of communication.

Dear brothers,

In ending this reflection on the first letter to the Thessalonians, I spontaneously remember that among the many teachings of St. Paul, *thankful prayer* has a position of privileged.

I intend to thank even now the divine Master for all the good that he will want to stir up in our Congregation under the guidance of his Holy Spirit and through the aid of the reflections and laboriousness of all the Paulines. I want to praise him for the precious help I have received from brethren in drafting this text.

Let us invoke Mary, Queen of the Apostles, so she will help us “to keep and ponder in our hearts” whatever the Spirit will inspire us.

May the example of our blessed, Frs. James Alberione and Timothy Giaccardo confirm us in our charism. Their sanctity splendidly proves that if we live the Pauline spirit, sanctity and professionalism in communication go well together. Like them, we too don't cease drawing “*from Jesus-Host... light, nourishment, victory against evil*” (AD 16) and Pauline authenticity.

With these sentiments I wish you all a happy and holy Easter and I greet all fraternally in the risen Christ.

Rome, 24 March 2005

Holy Thursday, Year of the Eucharist

Fr. Silvio Sassi
Superior general

CONTENTS

Letter of the Superior general	
<i>“To Progress Ever More”</i>: presentation	1
The first letter to the Thessalonians	4
I. Introduction	4
1. The city of Thessalonica	5
2. Foundations of the community	7
3. Profile of the Christians in Thessalonica	9
4. The first letter to the Thessalonians	10
5. Importance of the letter	12
II. The letter and its principal themes	13
1. <i>“We always thank God...”</i> (1,2–3,13)	13
2. <i>“...we beseech you and exhort you in the Lord Jesus...”</i> (4,1–5,27)	18
III. The letter in Fr. Alberione. Consequences for us today	23
1. How has Fr. Alberione read and interpreted the first letter to the Thessalonians?	23
2. Consequences for us today	26
IV. Steps for a pauline reading of the letter	30

Società San Paolo - Casa generalizia
Via della Fanella, 39 - 00148 Roma
Tel. 06.657.488.11 – Fax 06.657.488.00
E-mail: seggen@stpauls.it

Marzo 2005 – Pro manuscripto