

Re-creation of the Apostleship of Prayer



Document 2

The history of the Apostleship of Prayer

170 years: 1844 - 2014

Rome, March 11, 2014

I. Introduction.

During the worldwide process undertaken for the *re-creation* of the Apostleship of Prayer (AP), reflection on its historical origins has been very important. Once the focus was on the proposal for a re-created AP, implying something radically new, and not simply an adaptation of old content, it was necessary to look again at our history, to revisit the novelty and the enthusiasm of its beginnings. A re-creation of the AP was a challenge to propose something new, while being careful not to lose our distinctive identity. We have tried to proceed in *creative fidelity* to the origins, without giving up our own history.

We were moved by the conviction that the spiritual dynamic given to us in the far-off year 1844, the year of AP's birth, was a gift of the Spirit for the whole Church, which we did not want to lose. We still believe that the same Spirit enlightens us afresh today through the AP, opening a way for us that can respond to the spiritual needs of our contemporaries.

We also wanted to proceed in a spirit of discernment and inner freedom, necessary conditions for finding God's will. Keeping a distance from certain forms and practices which the AP took on in the course of its history, today we can recover the content of that initial inspiration and present it in a new way.

Visiting our history is the way to recognize, full of gratitude, what is indispensable in the AP, and the starting-point for re-planning it today. In our effort to bring about the AP re-creation, we have brought out the spiritual driving-forces which seemed to us central to our founding charism and still valid for the world today. It seemed to us that these are *apostolic availability, collaboration in Jesus' mission, living in a personal and affective relationship with him symbolized by his Heart, service of the Church in a worldwide prayer network, and the service of justice*. We shall find them in this reinterpretation of the history of AP.

II. Short historical note.

The AP began in 1844 in a house of formation for young Jesuits in Vals, in the south of France. Fr. Francis Xavier Gautrelet sj, these young men's spiritual director, suggested to them a way of being apostles and missionaries in their daily lives, uniting with Christ everything that they were doing during the day. The context of this suggestion came out of a very specific situation: priests carrying out their ministry as missionaries in distant

countries, in particular in Madurai in South India, came back to visit their homeland and passed by the seminary in which they had received their formation. Spontaneously and enthusiastically they told the young Jesuits about their work and their experiences, about so many people and situations in need of the gospel. Listening to these stories of fervour and missionary activity inspired the young students in Vals, but at the same time made them sad and disheartened because they realised how far they had still to go to be ordained as priests and sent on mission. Studies became endless, exams dry, community time useless, prayers routine and apostolic tasks of no account. They tried to cheer themselves up by spending hours in the library reading books about India, and as a consequence neglected their studies. Fr. Gautrelet then made a suggestion which would allow them to find new meaning in the midst of the frustration they were experiencing.

At Mass on 3rd December 1844 Gautrelet explained that St. Francis Xavier had given his life to following Jesus Christ, and that celebrating him today implied doing the same thing. Francis Xavier got as far as the coast of China, and went through many tribulations, moved by his passionate love of Jesus. Today, in their own circumstances, it was their job to carry out the same Christian mission, but here, in the house of formation in Vals, not in the Far East. It was the same choice, the same call from Jesus, the same passionate love, the same mission, but in different times and forms. He invited everyone – students and professors, whether his directees or not – to be missionaries here and now, through the simple offering to God of everything they were doing, striving to be available to Jesus in order to carry out their everyday duties well. As for the young, they ought above all to carry out well their duty as students.

In suggesting to them the practice of what he called an ‘apostleship of prayer’, Fr. Gautrelet made them understand that, more important than what they did was the love and dedication with which they did it. What counted was not *doing* much, but *loving* much. They should offer their everyday tasks to God with love, he told them, and unite them with Christ who continued to offer his life for the salvation of humanity. He made them understand that their lives were as valuable and useful for the Church’s mission as the lives of the most self-sacrificing missionaries, if they lived them with the same love. Their lives would be as apostolic as the most fervent preacher if they lived each little thing in union with the Lord’s Heart. What was important was the interior attitude of wanting to renew one’s love for Jesus and to make afresh, each day, one’s availability and commitment of life. It was the love of the Heart of Jesus which had chosen them, he said to them; they ought to respond to it by being ready to fulfil what He was asking them now, and to respond with generosity to this great gift that they had received.

The specific practice that Fr. Gautrelet suggested to them to keep this spirit alive was a prayer of offering of the day, every morning. With it they would declare their resolve and their mind-set that the whole of the day would be for the Lord. He invited them to re-focus each day *the placing of their lives within the divine will, having given up all disordered*

affections, for the salvation of their souls, as they had learned in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius (cf. Sp. Ex. 1). What was called *the Apostleship of Prayer* would show them a way which would help them to make real each day the ideal of *seeking and finding God in all things*, even in the simplest and most prosaic, so as to *love and serve in all things* (Sp. Ex. 233).

In short, the AP proposed to them the demanding and exciting way of living in permanent apostolic availability for love of the Lord. They would renew for each new day the 'yes' which they had spoken to the Lord in the Spiritual Exercises, asking afresh the grace to respond with complete generosity to the call of the Eternal King.

This gave the young Jesuits new enthusiasm in the daily tasks that had made them dispirited before. They understood that in their daily efforts and actions they could express their affectionate and personal love of Jesus, and that through them they would be responding to the mission to which He was calling them. They felt ready to make any sacrifice whatever for Him. They really did want to be good missionaries for their Lord, now and in the future.

The daily exercise of the prayer of offering also allowed them to understand the unity of this practice with Jesus' offering to the Father, which they made present each morning in the Eucharist. They understood that the offering of their hearts was in a certain way a Eucharistic offering, as the whole life of Jesus had been, and mysteriously went on being, Eucharistic. Jesus had loved them 'to the end' in giving his life for them, and this became real for them again in the Eucharist. They wanted their hearts to be like the Heart of Jesus, and this was precisely the content of what they were asking: to have Eucharistic hearts like that of Jesus, that is, hearts (and lives) offered to God and given up for others. Their lives were united with this mysterious and deep reality, helped by the simple prayer of offering that they were making each morning.

They understood that living this way of offering their lives to God each day was a real apostolate. They had dreamed of being missionaries and giving their lives for Jesus. Now it was clear to them that they did not have to wait till the end of their formation, their priestly ordination and being sent to distant countries to begin to be apostles and collaborators in Christ's mission. They could make radical commitment to Jesus real here and now in fidelity to the simple tasks of every day, especially their studies. This was exactly their apostolate, what they had to do at this moment, as students preparing for priesthood: a quiet, humble, hidden apostolate, but important and effective, because in Christ they were uniting themselves spiritually with the whole mission of the Church, and collaborating with his daily sacrifice and self-surrender in supporting the labours of missionaries scattered all over the world.

The young Jesuits also made the connection between their morning offering and their evening *examen*. At the end of the day the prayer of the *examen* allowed them to recognize and give thanks for what God had done in their lives with what they had offered in the

morning. These two moments of prayer, morning and evening, made them more open to God's action in them all through the day, and more conscious of letting themselves be led by him.

These practices and the budding Apostolate of Prayer spread among the Christians of the region near Vals, beginning with the country people whom the young Jesuits visited at the weekends. They would also be invited to collaborate in Christ's mission, living in fidelity to the gospel and offering their work, sufferings and prayer for the Church. They also could be apostles. In a few years this new proposal had spread all over the country and beyond, coming to have millions of adherents. AP groups were formed in parishes and Catholic institutions, a well-organized structure of Directors at the head of the new association was created in each diocese, the bishops took on responsibility for ensuring its vitality. In many places the AP came to take on the visible, structured form of an ecclesial Movement. There was always the possibility to be part of the AP without the need to belong to these specific groups, since all Christians were invited to live its spirit and adopt its simple practices. These two ways of living the AP were present from its beginnings. Canonically it came to be considered as a *pious association of the faithful*.

The practice of the AP gave for those who followed it a new significance to the efforts and routine of every day. Druggly daily life could now be offered to God as a mode of collaboration with Christ in the mission of the Church.

Put in another way, AP gave them a means of living their own baptism in the simplicity of daily life, and of participating in the priesthood of the whole Church, long before the baptismal vocation or the common priesthood of all the faithful were mentioned.

In the period between 1890 and 1896 the Pope became interested in this immense network of Catholics who were offering their lives and their commitment to give spiritual support to the Church's mission. He adopted it as a pontifical work and entrusted it to the Society of Jesus in the person of the Father General. Furthermore, from this date he began to commend to AP a monthly intention for prayer, which expressed a concern of his for which he asked the prayers of all Catholics. From 1928 onwards a second intention for prayer was added. The AP would receive two intentions for prayer from the Pope each month, and was responsible for spreading them all over the catholic world. They were called the *General Intention* and the *Missionary Intention*.

Praying with these intentions for global concerns in society and in the Church, especially for the 'mission countries', broadened the horizons of all these believers to universal dimensions. As well as strengthening their sense of belonging to the Church, they felt themselves to be apostles chosen by Jesus to collaborate with him, feeling that their simple lives were made useful in sustaining the Church's mission.

The formulation of the themes proposed by the Pope year by year has developed down to our own day, when we can see that a large part of the intentions for prayer show the universal Church's concern for peace and justice in the world. Praying for them presents to Christians month after month new challenges, pinpointing great human needs, for which they are invited to commit their lives in prayer and service.

III. The relevance of the historical roots of the Apostleship of Prayer for today

In the light of what has been said, we keep from the original inspiration of the Apostleship of Prayer:

- The AP, above all, helps to make concrete, to develop and maintain a **daily attitude of apostolic readiness**, through the offering of one's own life.
- The AP is a proposal to help **unite everyday life** with God's mission for each one, in docility to the Spirit. It acknowledges that each Christian's heart is fertile ground for vocation and commitment to the mission of the Risen Christ.
- The AP's practices lead to **the cultivation of a personal and loving relationship with Jesus through prayer**, where we come to realize God's gift and express our desire to respond with generosity.
- These practices, with their simple character, are **accessible to everyone**, independent of culture, socio-economic level or depth and clarity of religious experience.
- So, the AP **shapes life according to a Eucharistic dynamic**, or, in other words, articulates **Eucharist, Church and mission** in a compact and inseparable way, just as they are united in the **Heart of Jesus**. It teaches us to make the Eucharist our life, to serve in the Church, to understand life in mission-key.
- The AP came into being in deep union with the Church's mission and in contemplation of the world's problems, which soon became specific in prayer for the intentions of the Church and the Pope. Prayer for these intentions is not just a private and intimate practice – it puts us in communion with many others around the world and it challenges our own manner of living, inviting us to adjust ourselves better to the Gospel and to work for the justice of the Kingdom. Praying with AP commits us to acting in conformity with what we are praying.

IV. Conclusion.

Amid the tensions of the present world, complex and disheartened, Fr. Gautrelet's intuition can help us to deal better with the demands of everyday life, giving them a new meaning, an apostolic meaning, united with Jesus. They remind us that great moments and great results are developed in the slow maturing of everyday life. We will learn to live contentedly

following a simple lifestyle. Our quiet AP practices will give apostolic fruit as they unite us to Jesus, in Whom alone we place our hope of the new world for which we pray and work for.

This is why we want to recreate the AP, to help us be more available to Jesus' mission. We want to make accessible to the men and women of today, in renewed and meaningful language, a way of **apostolic readiness to collaborate with the mission of the Risen Christ, in which each one discovers an invitation to live with Him in an intimate and personal relationship, receiving the love of his Heart and responding to his call.** The re-created AP hopes to keep on helping each Christian, as it has done for these last 170 years, to live the deep joy of being an apostle of Jesus Christ, committed with Him to service of the world.

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