

Introduction of the Superior General during the opening of the Seminar

"To feel deep within that we are of God
and manifest ourselves as persons of God to others.
And to feel that you must bring Jesus to the souls,
that your heart is the Tabernacle of the Trinity;
and the words that are uttered,
the activities that are carried out,
the apostolate that are accomplished
are inspired by that Trinity
who is in your heart"

(Alberione, AAP 1959, 108.109)

Dearest sisters,

It is with deep gratitude to the Lord for what He has already worked in our hearts, that we begin the International Seminar with the theme **"Life in Christ Shepherd: the care of souls, ministry of the Sisters of Jesus Good Shepherd."**

I give to each one of you a cordial welcome in the certainty that during these days, we will be granted putting together the experience and the gifts of each one, with the aim to live this event in the grace and in the light of the Holy Spirit. We are summoned today, not as studios and experts, but as consecrated persons to God and His Gospel in the search of His will in accord to the pastoral ministry which the Church acknowledged and entrusted to our Congregation.

We are aware that the Lord calls us to incarnate with new fervor the pastoral charism, vital secret deposited in the great apostolic heart of our Founder, Blessed James Alberione. It is gift for us always open to new perspectives. We are here with the certainty that God precedes us and calls us to go there where the Shepherd Jesus He leads us and asks us to know how to indicate Him to our contemporaries, with our very life first of all.

The preparation and the organization of this Seminar, as you well know, responds to a mandate of the 7GC¹, which during the course of the work, manifested the demand to recomprehend and re-express our pastoral ministry in the vision of the "care of souls"² of the "pastoral care", expressions often used by the Founder to express the pastoral action.

¹ Cf Acts 7 GC, 2005, p. 284.

² Termine maggiormente usato dall'Alberione, cf. *"La cura d'anime come espressione specifica della missione delle SGBP nel pensiero di Giacomo Alberione"*. Studio presentato da sr Suzimara Barbosa de Almeida a conclusione del corso di formazione sul carisma della FP, a Roma, con la guida del professore Giancarlo Rocca, Caxias do Sul 2004, p. 48; p. 58 ss.

With the contribution of the sisters

To answer to the 7GC mandate asked a notable commitment of energy and time to involve all the sisters of the Congregation. Since the participation was free, this commitment was lived by some sisters and communities who have chosen to tread the proposed itinerary and shared their reflection, matured in the listening of the Word, through the five Worksheets of the *Lectio divina* sent last October 2007 to December 2008. I take this occasion to thank in special way these sisters who have given their precious contribution with simplicity and humility³.

At the beginning of our itinerary, in considering the synthesis of the Worksheets received, we have noticed how the theme is dear to our sisters' hearts. The loving care of Christ Shepherd who truly lives in our heart and makes us participate in his compassion for the tired and disoriented crowd of our time, *the lost sheep, the grass roots of society, hearts and souls thirsting for truth, well-being and peace*⁴.

For the part of the participants, is underlined many times that the fundamental and decisive condition necessary "to take care" of others effectively, is to have experienced the care of the Lord on oneself, founded upon a personal relationship with Jesus Good Shepherd. This awareness of the care of God for us is also a fundamental criterion of vocational discernment for every Pastorella, since the first years of initial formation.

Our "taking care" draws life from being led and nourished by the constant presence of God and by cultivating our internal garden, knowing that God calls us even today, to watch over his people with Him. Holding on to Him, we believe, can bud a new season of hope to which we intend to collaborate, remembering that a tree by itself, doesn't make a lot of shade, but together, united to Him, we can become a place of rest which humanity is looking for. We hold necessary to mature in the conviction that God wants to take care of his children even through that *community industriousness* which demands capacity of deep communication, a style of life that testifies the love of God, a commitment to safeguard fraternal life in communion so that all may have true and abundant life⁵. The beauty of a fraternity that makes resplendent the face of the Risen One is already taking care of the people of God.

For this it was underlined in the reflections received, the necessity to establish healthy and constructive relationships, capable of forgiveness and reconciliation, of goodness in welcoming the least pleasant aspects of each other's character and also the exigency to bear each other's burden, to carry upon oneself the weaknesses and sins of each one. To do in such a way that the internal problems of our communities doesn't absorb us, to the point of forgetting that our presence in the world should be a prophetic testimony of Love.

A lot of sisters underline that it is not possible to take care of others without an *ascetic journey* of continuous conversion, without a daily spiritual combat that favors a style of discernment and a continuous interior discipline; without a serious confrontation with a spiritual guide and a love of study that flows in the alberionian "studiosità",

³ Il contributo delle sorelle e comunità partecipanti sarà condiviso negli ultimi tre giorni del Seminario.

⁴ Cf Regola di Vita 14.

⁵ Cf Gv 10,10 e l'obiettivo del 7 CG: "... per condurre alle fonti della Vita"

capable of developing a way of living sapientially. The Primo Maestro defines this spiritual experience with the amazing expression: “*Cor poenitens tenete*”⁶.

Our pastoral care is expressed in the mission to *make the Gospel reach, that is Jesus alive to the heart of persons*, with that creativeness that is born from a purified soul and mind, moved by *pastoral charity* that has the courage to work with the new and old poverties but gazed with merciful eyes; of bringing cultures to confront itself with the Gospel, of accompanying every person to the vital encounter with God, through listening of the Word that generates life. We are always invited to keep one ear on the heart of God and the other ear on the heart of persons.

From the reflection sent to me by some sisters, I have picked up some questions that I re-propose to you and which can accompany us along these days of study: What does “care of souls” mean and how to re-express it today with the spirit with which the Founder has pointed out to us? What *noises* in our hearts and what *distractions* in our communities dissuade us from the attention to God and His Gospel? Which *interferences* prevent us to renew each day the baptismal commitment and religious consecration, so that our “taking care” may truly be effective and do not allow us to be imprisoned by discouragement and disappointment?

Which *situations* and *events*, in our Circumscriptions and in the Countries of origin, are awaking and reminding us of the urgency of a deeper prayer and more accurate discernment that makes our presence truly prophetic, capable of taking care of the human misery in us and in our contemporaries? In conclusion: How to be a community of faith in “care of souls” in our time?

Among the different fruits of the *Lectio divina*, sent by the sisters who personally wanted to share with me their experience of life, I consider this reflection:

“*Pastoral care* is born from love: the agape love of Jesus Good Shepherd who gives life for each of us, teaching us to love. He asks us, as he asked Peter: “Do you love me?” Many times we are capable only to say: “Yes, Lord, I love you”. His mandate, however always surprises us: “Pasture my sheep”. How come that before such request so profound and such a weak response, spring this commandment so demanding? Certainly, “to pasture” entrusted doesn't depend on our beautiful abilities, on our merits, but on our humility and sincerity to acknowledge who we are indeed, our deeper truth, that is already known totally by Him, our availability to give what we are able, but it should be everything! It is only with this humble and meek attitude, of one who is always needy of Love, that we can truly allow ourselves to love, to grow in love and to pass from *philia* to *agape*, until the configuration to Jesus Good Shepherd, until giving up life, freely, as He has done, as Peter and Paul have done and so many others after them”⁷.

We live in history marked by uncertainties and precariousness that concerns all continents, the whole humanity, for this it seems difficult to plan the future and to open ourselves to hope, but it is precisely for this, that it's more urgent the proclamation of the Gospel which gives grace and correct perspective to find again the sense of life and to stir new energies of solidarity and communion.

⁶ AD 152 insieme al “*nolite timere, Ego vobiscum sum, ab hinc illuminare volo*”.

⁷ Dalla testimonianza personale di una suora Pastorella inviata alla superiora generale.

We are convinced that this humanity can be led to the spring of life, *if we, firstly, allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit to the spring of Life who is the Father*. Only if the life of Jesus flows in us, can it become an experience of salvation to be shared with others; an experience capable to make emerged from the heart of persons the same fundamental need of salvation.

It becomes urgent then, to educate the question that all of us carry in the heart: *who takes care of my life?* Our life lived in Christ, becomes a concrete, transparent response that Jesus, the Risen One, is the true Shepherd who takes care! It is He, the Good Samaritan who stoops down on human wounds! It is He who is the answer that every human being looks for, even without knowing it. Here is the living Spring whom we are called to make visible through our “taking care”.

As what Pope Benedict XVI recently reminded us, *to take care*, specially of the new generations, passes through the joy and effort of a careful listening of their thirst of sense: *“The thirst that young people carry in their hearts is a desire for meaning and authentic human relationships, that will help them not to feel alone before the challenges of life. (...). Our answer is the proclamation of God, the friend of man, who through Jesus became close to each one of us. The transmission of the faith is an inalienable part of the integral formation of the person (...) The personal encounter with Jesus is the key to understanding the importance of God in our daily existence”*⁸.

Even the words of a Bishop that struck me can help us to enkindle the significance of the ministry of pastoral care today: *“I believe that the great challenge that the Lord proposes to us is to lead, guide, accompany persons to encounter the Lord Jesus and to self-offering to Him, attaining with the light of the Holy Spirit life close to the Father. This way dignity is given to the person and the cohabitation among persons in a rich country but always needy of conversion. In this journey, with the light of the Lord, it is necessary to know and guide all to holiness”*⁹.

Why precisely a Seminar?

The etymology of the word seminar, that comes from Latin, tells that the word is composed by *semen* = seed and *arium* = place where the seed is placed outside the ground. Therefore for us this seminar could be considered a privileged space for studying in depth our theme and to know in a sapiential manner the pastoral charism that has been given us.

So the Seminar is time of serious and assiduous study, enlightened by faith and much prayer, as Don Alberione recommended it: *“Study is communion, a communion with Jesus Truth. To study we should be with praying hands. Study and study with faith, to arrive at replacing in our mind the thoughts and the reasoning of Jesus Truth”*¹⁰.

The Seminar therefore is also time of spiritual discernment to recognize the appeals of the Spirit and to consider the theme of “care of souls” not as a field of action

⁸ Benedict XVI, Address of the Holy Father to the Bishops gathered for the 61st General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI), from 24 to 28 May 2010 per esaminare l'approvazione degli Orientamenti pastorali nel decennio 2010-2020.

⁹ In Zenit del 27/04/2010 “*L'esperienza di essere nominato Vescovo nell'Anno Sacerdotale*” di Mons. Marcelo Cuenca, vescovo di Alto Valle del Río Negro, Argentina, documento in cui descrive le sfide pastorali oggi.

¹⁰ Prediche in America, 1952, 280, stampate dalle FSP.

or apostolate, but rather as style or form of life necessary fundamental attitude to form a new mentality that permeates all our apostolic activity.

The Seminar is distinguished from a simple Convention precisely because it demands for the work of all and it functions in the measure in which each one participates actively. Even the persons who will share these days, are not considered simple speakers but persons who will offer us their spiritual and pastoral experiences, to favor our search and our deepening.

Why a Seminar with the theme of “care of souls”?

In order to continue the journey started with the 7GC which has as objective in the sexennial *“In continuous conformation to Christ Shepherd we deepen and re-express the ministry of pastoral care in order to lead humanity today to the springs of life”*.

The theme of the present Seminar aims therefore to continue this journey that we are actualizing in various ways in our Congregation. We believe that the term “care of souls” that can appear out of fashion or “out-dated”, in reality it says very well the heart of our charism, that is that to *take care* of the faith of the baptized who are suffering, from a serious weakness and fragility in this season of history; and to lead also the non believers or those who are astray to taste and desire the life in Christ.

We believe that Pastoral as care of persons is precisely the mission to guide to salvation, to heal the heart from the wounds of sin, to take care of the spiritual illnesses of which man is a carrier for a long time and emerge in new forms today. To take care means to know and to love the human condition that will be disclosed to us in the deep dimensions of the heart, there where the encounter happens with Christ, the Son of God, who made himself for us healer, teacher and shepherd.

Along the Seminar we will have the opportunity of examining new questions that emerge from this humanity which demand for new ways of taking care and we will have the opportunity of examining them, but it will be necessary to keep in mind the pauline theological anthropology which considers man integrally created in the likeness and image of God: body, soul and spirit; marked by sin and redeemed by Christ with His Passover. Out of this perspective, we can risk to take care of persons with illusions and therefore not accomplishing our mission to help them attain salvation, in a word, to Christian holiness.

The new pastoral demands that interpellate our mission in the Church and in the world, are signs of the times and places which God gives us to address our care toward the persons most needy of salvation. And this has asked us to do it in communion with the shepherds of the Church who through the sacrament of the Holy order are expressly called to the ministry of care of souls.

Our Rule of Life describes the communion with the shepherds of the Church as a fundamental characteristic of our charism that comes from the participation to the pastoral ministry of Christ: *The basic characteristic of our charism is our sharing in Christ’s pastoral mission of building up the Christian community in union with the pastors of the Church*¹¹.

¹¹ RdV 5.

Alberione reminded many times setting it in Christological-Marian key the spirit of our Institute as a manner of being more than doing, to be close to the shepherds as Mary was close to Jesus: *“Among the graces to be asked are especially to remember these: the spirit of the institute, that is not a simple work of the kindergartens or some good work in the parishes; but this: to be what was the Most Holy Virgin Mary Mother of the Divine Shepherd, in respect to Jesus Good Shepherd, according to your condition. Praying, you will be enlightened more and more. (...) Religious, intellectual and pastoral preparation. The intimate intelligence of Jesus Good Shepherd in public life; and of the mission of Mary as Mother of the Divine Shepherd, will make you true Pastors. You will live, you will operate, you will sanctify yourselves in the beautiful mission that the Lord entrusts to you”¹².* *“Oh! the beauty of your state, of your mission! (...). You have the care of souls in parish works. For the souls! The work is directed to the souls when doing a work means to cooperate to the ministers of God, to the Shepherds of souls.”¹³*

To understand our ministry in the Church we are asked intimate intelligence of Jesus Good Shepherd, that wisdom of the Spirit that penetrates the mysteries of God, lives them and transmits them. And also the capacity to understand and to guide “the souls”, that is the human heart. Thus our Founder expressed it: *“There are sisters who know how to enter the spiritual intimacies of the souls! And how they progress in the way of holiness! I don't know how much is already known on the beauty of the holiness and sublimity of your vocation. But you can never understand entirely your vocation. You will understand it only in heaven. You will understand it only in heaven”¹⁴.*

Presentation of the program of work

Our seminar will be carried out in 10 days subdivided in this way:

The first two days will be dedicated on the biblical and theological foundation of the pastoral action. A day dedicated on the history of the care of souls will follow. On June 14, after a further biblical reflection on pastoral ministry of the apostles Peter and Paul, we will see some emblematic figures in the history of pastoral ministry: Gregory the Great, John Crysostom, St. Paul of the Cross and the Saint of the Care of Ars. Using a suggestive imagination, we will climb on the shoulders of these “giants” in order to look ahead and to prepare ourselves to welcome the challenges of the near future.

On June 15, we will listen to a brief history of a parish. It will be followed by the testimonies of the different forms of pastoral care among which is a parish priest in Rome who is carrying out an innovative pastoral care in respect with the traditional manner. In the days that follow we will go within our experience: on the 16th we will listen to two conferences of the Pauline Family and in the afternoon will be the presentation of the Pastoral Plan of the nations where we are present as Congregation. On the 17th we will consider the Triple work and some particular pastoral initiatives. In the evening we will listen to some Pastorelle, who with their songs will express in an

¹² Doc. 62, Lettera alle Suore Pastorelle, manoscritto, in Archivio Storico Generale SJBP; citato anche in So, p. 50. Alla fine della lettera Alberione chiede a sr Gemma Nazzari, SJBP, di farne copia per tutte le case dell'istituto, perché egli possa firmarle e siano spedite il più presto possibile.

¹³ PrP II, 1957, p. 125.

¹⁴ AAP 1965, 41.

original way the care of the persons of today. The days from the 18th to the 20th will give us the chance to look at the future together as we listen to Alberione to pick up the spirit, engaging us to a sapiential elaboration of the contents and experiences, in view of new pastoral prospective.

Final invitation

Our greatest desire is to live the Seminar as a moment in which God takes good care of us, desiring to understand always better how to keep burning the flame of his Love in each one of us in the Congregation, in the Church. And through Him, to embrace the world in a new profound way.

It is the turn of each one, in a chain of communion and the work together, to remain in attentive listening to the Spirit, the only One who can give the dynamic impulse of the origin that orients, awakens new resources and permits new incarnation of "taking care".

This is why I suggest that at the end of each day, consider the following question: "*What do you want to tell me Lord, through all that I have heard?*". In this way we will remain in harmony with the voice of the Spirit, always more attracted to his music which unites our heart to the essentials of our life, centered on which is important and not on secondary questions. We ask with faith the gift to re-express our particular way of *taking care* in the Church and in the world in this historical moment.

This is a privileged time to share the life in Christ kept in the heart of each one, so as to be able to gaze at the future with greater awareness and hope, in the certainty that the Spirit will indicate to us the paths to follow even on the darkness of the night.

Finally, it seems important to remember that everything which we will have lived, shared and elaborated in this place, will build a spring of inspiration even in the celebration of a local Seminar in the different Circumscriptions, that will enrich more the contents offered here, and will permit all the sisters to live our same experience and to contribute to the Congregational reflection which will bring us until the celebration of the 8GC.

In our smallness and poverty is entrusted to us a beautiful task and a great responsibility. We begin therefore invoking the gift of a sapiential gaze, so that we will be able *to recognize* where the Spirit goes, *to renew* our relationship with Christ Shepherd and *to lead* with Him his people to the Father.

To all have a good work!

Sr Marta Finotelli
superior general

Rome, 10 June 2010

Thursday of the X week in Ordinary Time