

AFI – Past, present and future

AFI Consultation

Frascati, 4 - 6 May 2015

Beloved brothers,

Allow me, once again, to offer you a warm and affectionate welcome. We have gathered here for this *Consultation*, now in its sixteenth year. Some of us consider the journey we have made together over these years as representing a highly significant stage of our Christian lives, both personally and in our respective churches. Indeed the relationships that it has fostered, as we have cultivated and experienced them over the years, have become a vital and significant part of our personal lives and spirituality. They have done much to encourage our hopes, widen our horizons and enlighten our understanding of God's purpose for His church.

In the first section I shall offer some general introductory thoughts, especially concerning the “statute” (the nature and calling) of the *Apostolic Fellowship International* (AFI). **In the second** I shall speak about the past (our journey so far) and the present of AFI. **In the third** I would like to share a fundamentally important perspective on the future.

A. The “statute” of the *Apostolic Fellowship International* (AFI)

These three words – “*Apostolic – Fellowship – International*” – define its purpose and essence. In a word, we could say, its “statute”. The three words define three goals. This body is first and foremost a “fellowship”. Secondly, it is an “*apostolic* fellowship”. And finally, an “*international* apostolic fellowship”!

Fellowship/Koinonia

Let us start with the first term. AFI is first of all a “*fellowship*”! That means that it is built on the foundation of *relationships* that are both human and spiritual. I do not have a sufficient command of English to fully comprehend the meaning of the term in that language and culture. But the equivalent term in the Romance languages – in Italian, “comunione” (French “communion”, Spanish “comuni3n”, Portuguese “comunh3o”, Romanian “comuniune”), is much more closely related to the original Latin term “*communio*” (with its related noun “*communitas*”) and the New Testament “*koinonia*”. In my – and, I believe, our – understanding, the term “fellowship” should therefore be taken to refer principally to the New Testament concept of “*koinonia*” and the related and implied terms defining its characteristics in terms of “relationship”, “commitment” and “covenant” (Gr. *diatheke*, Heb. *berith*). Indeed God is relationship, the Kingdom of God is relationship, the church is relationship: what is created in His image and likeness is relationship! Now, undoubtedly the path we have explored has been lived out and experienced with differing intensities and practical outworkings, related to our limitations in terms of logistics (distance) and economics (cost), and determined by the priorities of our respective agendas, our personal motivations, our differing sensibilities and the “chemistry” of interpersonal relationships. We have experienced this “*koinonia*”, in practice, in various and diversified ways. We have increasingly discovered it to be an outgrowth of our personal fellowship with the Holy Spirit, experiencing it more and more as a revelation and experience of the *working of love within the Trinity*; nonetheless – as I have already stated – in alternating, varying and diversified ways, but in any case as complementarity, as the meeting and harmony of human beings, with our differences, moving towards the *fullness* of *koinonia* present within the Trinity, which is God's final goal and purpose for redeemed mankind and for the whole of creation. The result to date, with all its limitations, is nevertheless a reality which does not reside merely, or mainly, in our archives, but is deeply rooted in our hearts, a living, joyful deposit of a “beauty” that shows its face ever more clearly in the experience of unity. Finally, it must be noted that the “statute” of this “*koinonia*” derives exclusively from the desire

to make it a reality at the level at which we wish or are determined to live it out and carry it forward. We can realise it, at different levels of intensity, as *koinonia* between individuals. And this even by itself, when indwelt by the Spirit, is a strategic level. We can also realise it as *koinonia* between fellowships and movements; and this is a higher level. But the commitment involved in this *koinonia* is only what we decide to make of it. It does not possess it of itself, only potentially and in God. Its destiny is no more than what we decide to give it. Ah! if only we could fall in love with the beauty of this “*koinonia*”

Apostolic

The second term is “apostolic”. That is, it is a fellowship which has to do with apostles, and brings apostles into mutual relationship. *A fellowship of apostles*. This initiative was born out of the desire (and need!) to bring the foundational ministers of the church and their ministries into relationships of love, covenant commitment and mutual submission. It has a strategic function in promoting, developing and safeguarding the unity of the church. The dimension of *koinonia* is one that necessarily concerns every child and every servant of God. In the face of the proliferation, within our “field”, of isolated, self-appointed and self-referential apostolic ministries, exposed to the risks of loneliness, immorality and abuse of authority, it was and is necessary to offer/consider an answer/“remedy” of a “collegial” type, in accordance with the New Testament model; to embark, with humility and wisdom, and albeit through a process of trial and error, on an “experiment” that would enable us to arrive in time at a wise and balanced “model”, as near as possible to the one handed down by the New Testament and the sub-apostolic church; a model capable of answering the needs and condition of the modern church, of opening the way to build that “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church” (cf. the Apostles’ Creed), preparing herself to welcome the Bridegroom. We have witnessed with embarrassment, shame and sadness the scandal of ministers destroyed by isolation, carnality, pride, Mammon e power.

International

In the ecclesiology of many evangelical churches, and the majority of those touched by the pentecostal and charismatic movement, it seems as though importance, theological and spiritual dignity is given only (or at least mainly) to the local church. The church is the instrument through which the church becomes visible in its geographical area. And this seems to be the limit of the vision of most pastors and fellowships. But the revival of the last century has brought back to the centre of many people’s attention the two New Testament realities of the “household church” (“*domus ecclesiae*”) and the trans-local church, with the rediscovery (including in a missionary perspective) of the central role of relationships and the strategic importance of “trans-local” *co-ordinating ministries*. Furthermore, it has become evident that these ministries need to be in relationship with other similar ministries, even though with different gifts, in order to complement, build up and monitor one another. This awareness is still very fresh and new in the evangelical world. There is still a long way to go. Ours is merely one experience – no more than a “little cloud”. A valuable one, I have to say, however modest and limited in duration. But what matters is to get the “processes” under way. The Lord will bring to completion what has been started under His guidance and inspiration. Here I must say that, in the context of “globalisation”, this initiative and awareness has become a gift of God’s grace, an opportunity! Something that has sometimes been difficult to experience at the local or national level has become possible at an international and intercontinental level. Relationships that began, sometimes through spiritual affinities, other times from “chance” encounters and friendships, when the need presented itself, or the revelation of this particular aspect of God’s purpose for us and for His church... We came together, we made contact, we talked, we encouraged one another. We decided to walk together, in

committed relationships of love and submission. And we decided to open, wherever possible, a new front on the national and continental level.

B. Why did this “*koinonia*” come about?

For a positive reason: the revelation of the church as the Body of Christ which accompanied the rise of the “Restoration movement” in the late 1960s and its development in the ’70s and ’80s; the revelation of the continuation, strategic function and the need for proper use of all the Ephesians 4 ministries, including apostles and prophets. The need for *their full restoration to build the church and lead it towards its “fullness”*; the urgent need for them to make contact, to recognise one another and establish relationships of love, respect and mutual submission. But also *for a negative reason:* to take a stand against an ill-considered use and possible misuse of the ministries. “But do we not already have the Gospel?” it might be objected, in the words of Francis of Assisi. What need do we have of anything else? The Gospel is enough! The fact is that we have not yet learned the real meaning of “*koinonia*”, the life of fellowship in the church; and in the first instance, relationships and *koinonia between ministries*. There was therefore a need to bring this “arena” into existence: to remind ourselves of, experience and develop in practical terms our *koinonia*; to learn the fundamental principle of Christian relationships at the ministry level, and especially between ministries with co-ordinating responsibilities and ultimate authority for the life and unity of the church.

How it developed and grew

The best way to get an idea of this process is to take a look at the AFI web site (www.afint.org) or the list of the subjects considered and examined over the years. “After an initial phase”, I read in my paper from 2011, “in which we emphasised the theme of relationships (*koinonia*, fellowship), as foundational to the nature of God and the Body of Christ, and consequently to apostolic relationships, we then discussed and came to an agreement about the nature and strategic role of the apostolic ministry, both individually (personal oversight) and in relationship (collegial oversight), for the guidance, upbuilding and unity of the church. We then dealt more closely, as a natural progression, with the subject of the Church. The theme that was constantly present from 2004-2007 was “*The Church’s Journey Towards its Fullness*”. We explored the most important aspects of this fullness: 1. Unity; 2. Quality; 3. Quantity... In 2008 in Chile we began to consider the subject of “*The Kingdom of God, Church and Society*”, continuing with the same theme in Nigeria. The connection and continuity between these two subjects seemed clear to us... The theme of the Kingdom is basic to the Church and intersects its path towards its fullness, because the path towards fullness coincides with the process of growth and the increase of the Kingdom...” “In the course of these deliberations... we happened on the theme of “Transformation”. The subject of Fullness and that of the Kingdom raise the question, in God’s economy, of Transformation: transformation of the individual Christian and the Christian community, and – to the degree that they are transformed, however partially (but truly!) – that of society and of the nations in which we live. All this began from God’s insatiable, invincible and irreversible desire to live in and possess the heart of man. It is what I like to call – more even than the Gospel of the Kingdom – the Gospel of Desire! We must start from the Gospel of Desire in order to understand the Gospel of the Kingdom. We must start from the heart of God to understand the heart of the Kingdom. The Gospel of the Kingdom is nothing but the Gospel of the Desire which God has always had and continues to have, to enter and possess the heart of man! The bridge, the connection between the Gospel of Desire and the Gospel of the Kingdom, is the Gospel of the Incarnation. God’s purpose was to inhabit and experience man – the new tabernacle – from within... But all this would be incomplete if we did not comprehend that the ultimate purpose of the Gospel of Desire, of the Kingdom and of the Incarnation is the

Gospel of Transformation! God's desire has always been the complete recovery of man in order to transform him, from within, in his personal life and his relationships, into His own image and likeness!" Subsequently we turned our attention to the responsibility of the believer and the church to be salt and light, leaven and influence on society; a church that serves, a church that proclaims truth and models *koinonia*, a church for the poor, with a spirituality that views the world in a critical yet positive light (Alister McGrath), to "face the world as it is to make it what we want it to be" (Calvino).

Recently we have taken what I would call "a break for reflection" to think about possible developments of the "Fellowship" in the direction of an "Association". It has been a profitable debate which, at least as far as I am concerned, has allowed me to appreciate more deeply the vital importance of the "heritage" of values and spirituality from our experience together and has persuaded me of the importance of recalling and relaunching, both among ourselves and for those outside, the essential content of our "calling" and "identity", forged over these years and shown and given to us by the Lord right from the start of our journey together.

C. What is the future of AFI?

In conclusion, our future lies in faithfulness to our "calling", in a development that is consistent with our "original identity". The early documents – I am thinking of Positano, but also those that sprang from the fellowship and deliberations of the early "Consultations" – embody the clarity of enlightenment, a simplicity and strength, which are still capable of shedding light on our path. The Mission Statement – the vision – the values – the profile and style of the Co-ordinating Committee – describe with simplicity and clarity the ethos, the spirituality and values that we are called to cultivate. We have a rich common inheritance, which we have worked out by surveying and combining our cultural and sometimes – on certain points – even theological differences. The latter might have had, and still could have, the potential to cause divisions and a dissipation of the *koinonia* which the Lord has given to us. But by respecting our differences, we are learning, and with God's help will continue to learn, that differences – on the foundation of the Lordship of Christ – can become a path to unity. Let us learn to combine identity with universality. Yes, while respecting our differences, let us learn to live out our *koinonia* as the harmony of diversity!

Concluding note

I would like to add a few final words:

1. Mt 23:9-10: "*One is your Father, He who is in heaven...And One is your Teacher, the Christ*". This reminds us of the theme of brotherhood, the spirit of brotherhood by which we all recognise one another as true children of the same Father and thus brothers, servants of the one Lord.
2. Rom 15:7: "*Receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God*". Christ has accepted us with our personal histories, our weakness and fragility, our sins and mistakes. So we too should accept one another.

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