

Mission Statement

- To develop peer level fellowship
- To enrich and inspire each other
- To support and protect one another
- To hear God together and for one another
- To encourage cooperation to accelerate unity in the Body of Christ
- To provoke the Church to accomplish its whole mission in the World

AFI WEB CONSULTATION, 18-19 May 2021

Welcome and thanks

As we confidently look forward to the possibility of an AFI Consultation “in the flesh” in 2022 (at least we hope so!), we are thankful to God – and to technology, I add – for the opportunity, following on from last year, to hold this second Consultation online. For this I would like to offer my personal gratitude and that of the Executive to the Secretariat for their work, and to the technical staff who today are making it possible and are working on it. Thank you!

I would also like to thank the Executive for their important contribution in preparing the **Programme**, the willingness and hard work of the two main speakers in preparing their contributions which will help us in our thinking over these two days, and the contribution of one of our “Founding Fathers” for tomorrow’s “Devotional”. They are:

1. First, *Pastor Carlos Mraida* on the subject “*The end of what we used to be, the beginning of what we really are – Thirty Apostolic Strategies*”.
 2. Second, *Pastor Vinci Barros* on the subject “*Jesus, the perfect Model*”.
 3. Tomorrow morning, *Pastor Ernest Komanapalli* for the “Devotional”.
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Introduction

New Paradigms – An Important Change

Pastor Carlos Mraida, to whom I am grateful, in his excellent and thought-provoking contribution to this AFI session, speaks of this time marked by the Covid pandemic as a crucial transition towards “a new phase”; a “historic” transition *forging* “new paradigms” and *witnessing* a major cultural shift. He refers to a “fluid” time, a transition to a new epoch [from the modern to the post-modern], an authentic, revolutionary, epoch-making change. “New paradigms” and “change” are the key words.

The Touchstone

Then *Pastor Vinci Barros* also deserves our gratitude. He too has recalled our attention – in a way that is strategic for this time – to the person of Jesus (Christ at the centre! “*When I am lifted up... I will draw all people to myself.*”¹), to Jesus’ life and conduct, to the crucial importance *for us* of following in Christ’s footsteps. In other words, being disciples! Indeed, we have been called to look to Christ at all times, in all seasons and cultures, to gaze upon his face, to be his disciples, to be “*transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*”²

Newness and Continuity

¹ Jn 12:32.

² 2Cor 3:18.

So then, we are exhorted on the one hand – even in this “season” – to remain open to the changes brought by the “kingdom” approaching from the future. On the other hand, to remain faithfully grounded on the “touchstone”, the “rock of ages”, eternal and unchangeable, which is the Lord himself. He is *“the same yesterday and today and forever.”*³ This is the ageless, intercultural, eternal “profile” of the Son of God, the Lord who is the Christ.

Thinking Paradigmatically

I recently read a superbly enlightening passage by the well-known evangelical theologian Robert E. Webber, on the importance of “paradigm thinking”⁴. He maintains that this approach, applied to the history of Christianity, helps us to understand that “since its beginning, the Christian faith has been filtered through a variety of cultures.” And that “in each of these cultures Christianity has been primarily communicated through one or more dominant principles (‘paradigms’).” He quotes several examples. In the classical period, the focus was on “Mystery”; in the Middle Ages on the “Institution”, during the Reformation on Individualism, in the modern (Enlightenment) period on Reason, and now finally, in the postmodern era, back to the “Mystery” paradigm. What this tells us is that, in ways that we may not recognise, we too are children of our age and probably think, to a greater or lesser degree, with the paradigms of our time, similarly “filtering” our ideas of Christianity.

Webber further proposes:

- “Paradigm thinking also provides us with an intelligent way to deal with times of transition. For example, we currently acknowledge that the Christian faith incarnated in the modern culture, with its philosophical assumption of a mechanistic world understood through empirical methodology, is eroding. The cultural revolutions are in the process of ushering us into a new era. In this swirl of change, many are seeking to honestly incarnate the historic faith in the emerging culture. This goal will not be accomplished by abandoning the past, but by seeking out the transcultural framework of faith (i.e. the rule of faith) that has been blessed by sociocultural particularity in every period of church history.⁵
- **“Therefore – he concludes – the point of integration with a new culture is not to restore that cultural form of Christianity, but to recover the universally accepted framework of faith that originated with the apostles, was developed by the Fathers, and has been handed down by the church in its liturgical and theological traditions.** This hermeneutic⁶ allows us to face the changing cultural situation with integrity. Our calling is not to reinvent the Christian faith, but, in keeping with the past, to carry forward what the church has affirmed from its beginning. **We change**, therefore, as one of my friends said, **‘not to be different, but to remain the same.’** Right now we are caught up in the throes of changing from modernity to post-modern times. So let’s look at this shift more closely to figure out how we ought to change to remain the same.”⁷

Pastor Mraida, in his paper, seeks to help us in making this transition: to help us to be open to change, in a time as “fluid” as our own, “to remain the same.” This means, at the same time as we understand the ebb and flow of the ages with the paradigms that have characterised them, discerning the abiding, trans-geographical and trans-cultural “inheritance”, the *scarlet thread* [i.e. the defining, fundamental

3 Heb 13:8.

4 Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith – Rethinking evangelicalism for a postmodern world?* Baker Book House, 1999, pp. 16-17.

5 *Op. cit.* pp.16-17.

6 “Interpretation”. Of texts, certainly; but also, as in this case, of human life.

7 *Op. cit.* pp.16-17.

elements] of the *“faith once for all entrusted to God’s holy people”*.⁸ Or in other words, as times and seasons come and go, as one generation succeeds another and amidst the “tumult of history”, the essence and the abiding identity of the “true” church. Allow me, for once, to use this adjective. I mean *the substance* and *the continuity* of the “church” through the alternating changes in its historical circumstances, in political regimes, in economic structures and models of society, customs and ways of thinking. In a word, of the “culture that is us” – as Mraida reminds us – and which we produce.

The Antiquity and Modernity of the Apostolic and Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creeds

The *Apostolic Creed* – probably dating from the second century – was and is believed and confessed by the early church, through the centuries, and still today by all Christians. It is one of those basic documents which, though variously “read” in the different intervening cultures, have preserved some of the abiding, fundamental and defining elements of the Christian faith. I am thinking particularly of the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and its function in “begetting” the church: the church of the Trinity. In fact the church – “*Creatura Spiritus*”⁹ – is mentioned in the same article, the third, as the Holy Spirit.

And my thoughts go – in continuity with this, and as another example – to the faith defined in the *Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed* as to the distinctive characteristics of the church: *“I believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church”*. For the early church as for the post-modern one, the fundamentals are the same: Oneness, Holiness, Catholicity and Apostolicity. And its apostolicity, the apostolic foundation – of course on the foundation of Christ – serves to promote unity, holiness, catholicity and – here we believe this too – apostolicity.

A spiritual and cultural challenge – and so we come to our dreams (in part already dreamt, but not yet fully realised), to what we are dreaming of for the time that lies before us. A time that must be embraced, made our own, “espoused” in a special way by a “fellowship” – I prefer the word “*koinonia*” – such as the *Apostolic Fellowship International*, or AFI, is called to be. With the courage needed to **go to the frontier** pointed out to us by the Apostles’ Creed, to carry over *“the faith received once and for all by the saints”* into the time that is coming to meet us from the future. A time in which – when we reach the promised “fulness” – the dream will be fulfilled; because “the future belongs to the Lord”. This is the perspective of the Scriptures. We believe it. The “apocalypses” feared by so many are merely the scenarios, the times through which the pilgrim “bride” is called to travel on a journey of growing enlightenment and transformation which will bring her to the “fulness” – partial but real – of God’s purpose for each individual and each church in its generation. And then for the whole church, the whole Body of Christ, at his Return, at the end time, the church of the Lamb, that of the ultimate wedding. In the meantime we let ourselves be directed by the declaration of intent of our “spiritual family”. The way for us is the way of Christ in the post-modern world. The life for us is the life of Christ in the post-modern world. The style for us is the style of Christ. Until the Lamb’s wedding feast. Until the final gathering in.

Ishmael and Isaac

A final warning. In every generation “the Abrahamic church” has given birth to its Ishmaels and its Isaacs, and Isaac to its Esaus and its Jacobs... And so on. In Egypt, in the desert, in the promised land... Let us not be discouraged. Thank God, there is good in every season. Thank God for the Isaacs, the Josephs, the Jacobs... Let us thank God for all of them. And – a vital lesson – once they have been born, let us not

⁸ Jude 3.

⁹ Thus described by the Fathers. But also as “*Creatura Verbi*” and “*Creatura Patris*”.

slaughter the Ishmaels. Let us not despise Egypt, let us learn from our deserts. All things work together for good for those who love God. And he loves us!

Giovanni Traettino