

A Saint for Hard Times

Victor Hoagland CP



RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS BEGIN WITH A CALL. Usually God calls one person first – like Peter, James and John – who in turn call others. The Passionists, – a religious movement of priests, brothers, women religious and laypeople – are found in most parts of the world today. Their founder is St Paul of the Cross and they're called to keep alive the memory of the Passion of Jesus Christ.

Paul lived in eighteenth-century Italy and for eighty-one years experienced hard times – times in many ways like our own.

Italy's economy then was severely depressed as countries along the Atlantic Ocean like England,

Spain and France captured world markets. As its trade dwindled, poverty and unemployment spread across the Italian peninsula. 'Poor Italy!' Paul would say of his battered land.

The church in Italy also experienced hard times as Europe's monarchs grabbed its resources and held the popes under their thumb. It was the beginning of the Enlightenment in Europe, and 'enlightened' scholars and scientists were teaching that real progress came through human efforts alone. No need for revealed religions or prayer or spiritual help, they said God, if God exists, was little involved in human affairs.



The Passion is a mystery found everywhere

ends meet. Six years after hearing the sermon in church the young man had another strong experience of God.

‘In the summer of 1720, at the time of the grain harvest, after communion at the Capuchin church in Castellazzo on a street corner near my home – I was raised up in God in the deepest recollection with complete forgetfulness of all else and with great interior peace ...’

Shortly after, Paul made a retreat of forty days in a small room in a nearby church where he experienced temptations and spiritual consolations as he prayed in imitation of Jesus Christ. At his local bishop’s request he kept an account of how God worked in his soul; his retreat account is considered a classic of Christian spirituality.

The Passion of Jesus was at the heart of his experience; it would always be at the centre of his spirituality. For him, it was the door into the Presence of God where one rested ‘in the bosom of the Father’ and received the blessing of ‘great interior peace.’

Paul ended his forty-day retreat convinced that God wanted him to begin a new community in the church, but the times were unfavourable. Most church and government authorities thought there were already too many religious communities in the world.

After a disappointing attempt to interest the pope in his cause, Paul and his brother John Baptist lived as hermits, then as priests, on Monte Argentario, an isolated mountain on the Mediterranean Sea at the edge of the Tuscan Maremma (at the time the poorest part of poor Italy). They began preaching missions in this run-down land of small towns built above unhealthy swamplands, where bandits roamed the lonely roads and foreign armies periodically fought battles for control of Italy.

Travelling from town to town, they would set up a large cross on a platform in the town square, preach to the people for twelve to thirteen days and then move on to another place. Paul emphasised daily

Some eighteenth-century pundits were predicting that religion, and the Catholic church in particular, was coming to an end.

Just the time for God to call for saints.

In 1714 young Paul Danei had a striking experience of God. It happened during an ordinary sermon in an ordinary church, preached by an unknown priest. A sense of God and a desire to serve him filled his heart. Over the years his experience grew and it centred on the Passion of Jesus Christ. So taken was he by this mystery that eventually Paul Danei preferred signing his name as Paul of the Cross.

If you asked St Paul of the Cross today for some words of wisdom, he probably would point to a cross he usually carried and tell you to look at the world you live in, then look at yourself with this mystery of Jesus Christ in mind. Maybe he would say something like this:

‘Are times bad? Is your church shaken? Is God nowhere to be seen?’

‘Well, what about my own lifetime? That dreadful time, when faith crumbled and God seemed to have abandoned his Son?’

‘Yet, God was never closer than in that dark moment, and God is close to you now. I found him first at a bad time, in an ordinary church, listening to an ordinary sermon. You can find him too. Don’t be afraid of the darkness. And be ready: God uses simple things to come to you.’

In his youth, Paul worked for his father, a ‘poor tobacconist’ who moved his family and small store from one town to another in northern Italy to make

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prayer, especially meditation on the Passion of Jesus, as the door into the Presence of God and strength in the darkness of life.

After the missionaries left, some wrote to Paul looking for spiritual help. His letters back to them (over two thousand remain) focus mainly on helping them to pray. If people prayed, he said, his work was done; God would do the rest. He was tender and blunt, enormously patient with them, because he knew from his own experience that God works slowly, tenderly – sometimes bluntly.

They told him their doubts, their fears, their temptations, their yearnings, their questions and sufferings. He called these things their ‘darkness,’ and drawing on John’s gospel, a favourite source, told them that darkness is where the Light shines. Don’t be afraid of it.

‘Darkness and suffering can be your friends,’ he wrote, ‘faith comes alive in the dark.’

By a ‘high providence’ God sent Jesus Christ to dwell among us. In the darkness you share in the

mystery of his Passion and Resurrection.

‘We carry the cross with Jesus and don’t know it.’

Paul never probed into the causes of human darkness by social analysis nor did he offer much psychological advice or counselling, so popular in spirituality today. ‘I am a blind guide,’ he said of himself and warned against over-analysing. ‘You shouldn’t be looking at what you’re going through and philosophising minutely about it and reflecting so much on yourself ... By thinking too much about yourself, you lose sight of the Sovereign Good.’ The wise and tender book of the Passion of Jesus will teach you to understand yourself and understand life, he taught. Let it guide the way you pray and the way you live.

But for him the Passion of Jesus was not limited to the words of the Gospel. It was a mystery found everywhere.

Certainly, Paul saw the Passion of Jesus relived in the Tuscan Maremma, the poorest part of Italy, where he spent most of his life. ‘I saw the name of Jesus written on the foreheads of the poor.’ He lived among poverty-stricken people but could do little to change the economic and political systems that kept them poor.

Like Paul, Passionists today still see the Passion of Jesus burnt into ‘the foreheads of the poor’ and point to the strengthening message of the Cross. But in solidarity with the poor they are also trying here and now to stand up for human rights and build a just society, especially in some of the poorest parts of the world. They see the struggle for justice and peace and the integrity of creation as a vital part of their spirituality.



THE LEGACY OF
ST PAUL OF THE CROSS

A SAINT LEAVES A LEGACY; what legacy did the saintly founder of the Passionists leave?

He died on 18 October 1775, fourteen years before the French Revolution. In 1798, twenty three years after his death, that revolution spilled over into neighbouring Italy and the Papal States. The pope, Pope Pius VI, was imprisoned by Napoleon, religious houses and church resources were taken over by French forces and the Catholic Church in Italy, like the Catholic Church in France, was crushed by a seemingly invincible French general and his powerful army.

God uses simple things to come to you

In May of 1810 the situation got worse. Napoleon declared an end to the papal domains and ordered the new pope Pius VII to be imprisoned in Savona, Italy. Thousands of religious were led under police escort from their religious houses back to their homes and told to start another life. Among them were two hundred and forty-two Passionists, the community laboriously founded the previous century by Paul of the Cross.

The old church was dead, the emperor said. He would replace it by one of his own.

If Wikipedia existed then and someone bothered writing an article about Paul of the Cross, thirty five years after his death, the article would probably call him a poor deluded figure, now buried in an old abandoned church on the Caelian Hill in Rome. His community's disbanded and no longer exists.

Of course, the church didn't die and neither did the Passionists.

Historians usually praise the brilliant diplomacy of Cardinal Consalvi, the pope's secretary of state, for keeping the church alive in that chaotic time and getting it on its feet again after Napoleon's defeat in 1814, ending Europe's long nightmare.

But the Passionists may have had something to do with it too.

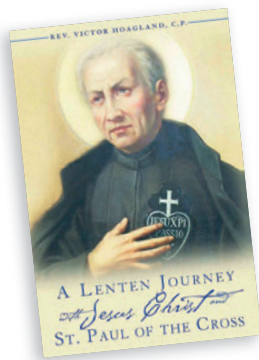
Certainly, Vincent Strambi, the Passionist bishop

and first biographer of Paul of the Cross, was a major inspirational church figure at that time. Before Napoleon's troops invaded the city for the first time in 1798, Pius VI called him to strengthen the Roman people in their faith by preaching in four of the city's major churches. He was called on repeatedly to raise the hopes of a frightened city. After Napoleon's defeat, Pius VII asked Strambi to Rome again to preach a nine day retreat of reconciliation – not everybody stood up to the French invaders.

Vincent Strambi was a pillar of strength for the church in crisis, preaching the mystery of the Cross by word and example in his dioceses of Macerata and Tolentino and throughout central Italy. He spoke to a church in ruins. Years of house arrest for refusing to take the loyalty oath to Napoleon only increased his stature. From what we know, other Passionists – also faithful followers of Paul of the Cross – joined him in shoring up a battered church.

What is St Paul of the Cross' legacy to us? We know he not only preached the mystery of the Cross, but lived it. He held on to his dreams through hard times and the community that followed him also kept that dream alive when times were hard.

That's the mystery he held on to. Wouldn't he tell us to hold on to that mystery too?



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If St Paul of the Cross were to accompany you through Lent, I'm sure he would come to you as you are and the world you live in

as it is. He was never afraid of darkness or dark places, so you may find him a helpful spiritual guide. He trusted in Jesus Christ and his cross, the wisdom and power of God. I'm sure he may bring some of that wisdom to you.

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