

Remembering the Passion of Jesus

What charism and what spiritual gifts would God have given to Saint Paul of the Cross for today's world? To what vocation would God have called him? Would not Saint Paul of the Cross still be convinced that the cause of the evils of our time is the forgetfulness of the Passion of Jesus? And that only the Passion of Jesus is the most efficacious remedy for the evils of our time? We realise that the forgetfulness that Paul of the Cross spoke of is the same as that of Paul the Apostle when he referred to 'the risk of making vain the Cross of Christ' (1 Corinthians 1:17). The mystery of the Cross is the source of salvation and through it we share in the tribulation of humanity, especially of the most poor and abandoned (*Passionist Constitutions*, No. 3). Here the Crucified One assumes his true identity and also invites us to participate in His passion (*Passionist Constitutions*, No. 65).

The Disciples asked, 'Master, where do you live?' (John 1:38). And we can clearly hear his answer, 'I live among the crucified ones of today'. He himself redirects us into the violent reality of the different situations of our world. What does the *Memoria Passionis* mean today? Jesus, the Crucified One, is the space offered by the Father in which the marvellous possibility of salvation takes place. It is on the Cross that we understand who God is and who we are. And we can also understand the solidarity that exists between

the Crucified One and those who are crucified and how the death of Jesus is a project of life for us. It is the supreme evidence of God's love. And from the Cross is born a new understanding of our world. The Cross reveals the God of our future, of the new creation in which the peace predicted by the Prophets of the Messianic times will take place: peace within us; peace with our brothers and sisters; peace with nature. This can happen only by embracing the spirit of the Passion.

It is not primarily the amount of work that makes a religious community grow, but the quality: you can organize a community, but you generate it by the fruitfulness of its charisms. And among these charisms, holiness is the most fruitful. And this brings us back to the necessity of making God and his Word the centre of our lives. We must live our lives on the level of faith and it is on this level that we have to see and judge our lives. The greatest expression of the life of Jesus was his death on the Cross, his gift of love, in total obedi-

ence to the will of the Father. While he accepted the extreme futility of his death, emptying himself of every power on earth and in heaven, he attained the greatest degree of fruitfulness that re-establishes a new covenant through the supreme act of love for his Father and for us. It is on this level of love and obedience that we must live our own difficulties:



Crucifix on the staircase of the *Campanile* of the Monastery of Saints John and Paul, Rome.

physical concerns, weaknesses, ageing, and illness – all situations that are beyond our control. It is the participation in the Paschal mystery of Jesus.

Paul of the Cross had a particular devotion to the Child Jesus sleeping on the Cross. He was moved to tears on Christmas Eve when he would carry the image of the Christ Child in procession into the Church in the presence of the community for the celebration of the feast. The mystery of the Incarnation is already a mystery of Love and Passion. For Paul of the Cross the Child adored by the three Wise Men was none other than the King of the Jews, the man who died under the sentence of Pontius Pilate:

Jesus, the Nazarene, the King of Jews. The grottoes of Bethlehem and of Calvary are part of the same reality of love.

Silence is the setting for listening through recollection. Silence quiets the noise around us and gives us the possibility to listen to the silent Word and the Spirit of Love that comes from the Father. Detaching ourselves from the business and chaos that surround us and setting them aside will help us to be the 'nothing that receives all'. God will speak and communicate to us in silence. Silent meditation on the Passion of Jesus will be the secret and mysterious communion of love that will lead us to understand the sufferings of Jesus.

Solitude is the place where silence is possible. It is the space where God and nature speak. On the mountain, alone with ourselves and with God, we can immerse ourselves in the loving presence of God. The noise of the world is far away and we re-establish the critical distance from those things that distract us. There it is possible to enter into prayer and to contemplate the mystery of God. There you can feel the presence of God. Giuseppe Orlandini used to say about the Founder when they were living in the hermitage of Saint Anthony on Monte Argentario, 'Frequently during the evening he used to hide himself between two rocks to remain in prayer in the silence of the night until the dawn'.

And Rosa Calabresi said, 'his prayer was pro-

found; his life was a continuous prayer'. One day with great fervour Paul said to Brother Francesco, 'I cannot understand how someone who never thinks of God can even exist'. He used to observe and guard the environment that allowed him to pray. In a letter in which he speaks about contemplation done in silence, or in spirit and truth, he concludes, 'This divine fishing done in the sea of Divine Love which flows from the sea of the holy Passion of Jesus is done in the same waters. This occurs in the interior kingdom of the spirit in pure faith and burning love'.

Poverty will be another value that will allow us to be immersed in the mystery of God because of the freedom that it gives from attachment to things.

We cannot conclude without remembering Mary. Saint Paul of the Cross, having understood that the only remedy for the evils of this world is the Passion of Jesus, the miracle of miracles of love, also had a great Marian devotion. The Passion of Jesus and that of his Sorrowful Mother are really one and the same thing. He compared the sufferings of Mary to an ocean and says, 'In the passion of Jesus, there are two oceans of sorrow. One is of the Son the other is of the Mother'.

The two sorrows are at the same time so different, but at the same time so close that you cannot see the distance between the two. The mother, who dies in her heart, stands next to her son, whose heart was poured out.

The maternity of Mary will give birth to a great number of foreign children; in the end the orphans, the neglected, the sinners, will have a mother in communion with God. Even Adam and Eve will have a mother. And also Judas, if only he had wanted, would have had the sweetest of all mothers. A new world is born under the Cross.

Father Ottaviano D'Egidio CP

Father Ottaviano has been Superior General of the Passionists since 2000. This address, here in an edited form, was given at a meeting of the Passionist Asian/Pacific Conference.

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PASSIONIST SYMBOLS

The Cross

The cross is the symbol of Christ's victory over sin and death; it is the tree of man's defeat which became the tree of victory, the tree of life which stands in the centre of the holy city of Jerusalem, whose leaves will bring salvation to all peoples. Saint Bon-



Saint Paul of the Cross preaching from the Mission Platform.
Painting in the Monastery of Saints John and Paul, Rome.

aventure says, 'The Cross is a tree of beauty; consecrated by the blood of Christ, it is filled with every fruit'. Paul of the Cross speaks of the cross as the 'sacrosanct tree of life' which gives forth sweet balsam', and whose fruit appears bitter to the palate of the senses but is very sweet to the palate of the spirit'. The cross is the 'great letter of life', the 'standard of the true servants of God'. Paul advises his readers to become holy with the 'hidden holiness of the Cross' he wishes to show them the link between the Cross of Jesus and that cross which is their own sufferings: 'The Cross is always good, and also holy, and whoever knows the great treasure there is in suffering, desires nothing but pains'. For Paul, the follower of Jesus is one who loves the Cross; this love transforms suffering into joy:

Whoever loves Jesus seeks nothing but suffering. I am consoled that you are one of those most fortunate souls who go along the way of Calvary, following our dear Redeemer. Happy are you if you follow this most precious road; one day you will sing, in company with the other lovers of the holy Cross: Your crosses, dear God, are the joys of my heart. How beautiful it is to suffer with Jesus!

Letter to Sister Teresa Costanza Pontas, 6 February 1721

When you place yourself peacefully at the feet of Jesus, be one with him as he hangs there, naked on the Cross. In this way you are sure of being on the right path. Let yourself remain there, within God's heart, in a sacred silence of faith and love. By resting in God in this way you will learn the wisdom of the saints and God himself will make you able to proclaim his Gospel.

Letter to Father Joseph Mary of St Laurence (Giojello), 4 December 1764

THE PASSION OF JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Peter's Denial

Few scenes draw the Christian reader into the mystery of the passion as this one does. It is obvious that the passion account is calculated not only to retell the sufferings and death of Jesus but to reflect on the crisis that suffering enkindles for those who would follow the way of the Son of Man. In Matthew's passion narrative the denial of Peter is not the only scene in which we follow through on the fate of those who were 'with Jesus'. At the conclusion of the trial Matthew will also present us with the final chapter of the Judas story (see 27:3-10). This incident, unique to Matthew's Gospel, adds as well a new dimension to the Peter story. The failure of the leading apostle not only serves as a foil to the courageous testimony of Jesus but Peter's tears of remorse upon remembering the words of Jesus will contrast with the despair of another apostle who also bitterly regrets his failure but does not choose repentance.

The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, Donald Senior CP © 1990 by the Order of Saint Benedict, Published by Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota. Reprinted with permission.

PRAYING THE PASSION

Saint Paul of the Cross

I know that I also made some colloquies on the sorrowful Passion of my beloved Jesus. When I speak to Him about His sufferings I say, for example: 'O my Good God, when You were scourged, what did You feel in Your Most Sacred Heart? My Beloved Spouse, how much did the vision of my great sins and my ingratitude afflict you? O my Love, why do I not die for You? Why am I not overcome with sorrow?' Then I feel that sometimes my soul can no longer speak, and I remain thus in God with His sufferings infused into my soul, and sometimes it seems that my heart would break.

Spiritual Diary, 26 November 1720

During Holy Communion I was particularly recollected, especially when I talked to my Jesus with sorrow and love about His sufferings. I do not know how to explain this deep grace which the Good God gives to me at this time, because I cannot explain it. Know that in talking to my Jesus about His sufferings, sometimes as soon as I have repeated one or two of them, I have to stop there because the soul can say no more and she feels that she is melting away. She remains thus, languishing with deep delight mingled with tears and with the sufferings of her Spouse infused into her. Or indeed, to explain myself better, the soul is plunged into the Heart and into the most holy sorrow of her beloved Spouse, Jesus. Sometimes she understands everything and she remains in God this way, with that loving and sorrowful contemplation. This is very difficult to explain, and it seems to me to be always something new.

Spiritual Diary, 8 December 1720

Ask His Divine Majesty to enable you to touch the depth of your soul. But when the Lord causes this nothingness to disappear into the infinite all, it is then necessary to be very obedient to the gentle breeze of the Holy Spirit. The point which Your Reverence does not understand, that is, of making the holy sufferings of the gentle Jesus your own by works of love, His Divine Majesty will enable you to understand when it is pleasing to Him. This is a work which is totally divine. The soul totally immersed in pure love, without images, in purest and naked faith (when it pleases the Supreme Good) finds herself in an instant immersed in the sea of the sufferings of the Saviour, and in a glance of faith she understands everything, without understanding, since the Passion of Jesus is a total work of love. The soul remaining all lost in God, who is Charity, who is all love, is made a blend of Love and sorrow, because the spirit remains totally penetrated with it, and remains totally immersed in a sorrowful love and in a loving sorrow – it is the Work of God.

Letter to Father John Mary Cioni, 14 July 1756

PASSIONIST SAINTS



FEBRUARY 27

SAINT GABRIEL

Saint Gabriel was born in Assisi, Italy on 1 March 1838. His mother died when he was a small child, leaving a family of thirteen children.

As a young man, Gabriel was lively, intelligent and popular at school, with a successful career ahead of him.

To the surprise of everyone, he entered the Passionist Community and spent his remaining years in prayer and solitude. His father tried to dissuade him from becoming a Passionist but Gabriel followed his vocation. He continued to grow in faith and holiness, while his physical strength diminished, weakened by sickness and the demands of the life he now led.

He died in 1862 at the age of 23, just before his ordination to the priesthood

VISIT TO A CRUCIFIX

by Saint Gabriel

SWEET JESUS, for how many ages have you hung upon your Cross, and still men pass you by and regard you not except to pierce anew your Sacred Heart! How often have I, too, passed you by, heedless of your great sorrow, your many wounds, your infinite love! How often have I stood before you not to comfort and console you, but to add to your sorrow, to deepen your wounds, to scorn your love. You have stretched forth your hands to comfort me, to raise me up, and I have taken those hands that might have struck me into hell and have bent them back upon the cross and have nailed them there, rigid and helpless. Yet I have but succeeded in engraving my name in your palms forever. You have loved me with an infinite love, and I have taken advantage of that love to sin the more against you. Yet my ingratitude has but pierced your Sacred Heart and forth upon me has flowed your Precious Blood.

O sweet Jesus, let your Blood be upon me not for a curse but a blessing. Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on me. Amen.