

Convictions of Faith

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CHRIST'S PASSION is the finest expression of God's great love, trust in God's ability to bring every circumstance to good, and belief that God is constantly active in our lives.

Each of us, as we grow up, begins to make formulations or conclusions about who we are in relationship to the world around us. These ideas begin forming our belief systems or our convictions. St Paul of the Cross was certainly no different. In this reflection, we will focus on his convictions and, specifically, we will consider St Paul's convictions around issues of faith and belief that were based on observation of repetitive patterns. For example, in the Old Testament we look at story after story of how the Lord restores humanity, and say, 'Oh, isn't

the Lord merciful and forgiving?' This is a faith conviction that is enlightened by reflection upon the experience. Each of us has the capacity to do this.

So what are some of the faith convictions of St Paul of the Cross in his early years? We answer this question by looking at the experiences of his younger years: what he was reflecting on, the truths and conclusions he drew, and how he used these to provide direction for others. Certainly, having experienced so much death in his family, and seeing how his mother responded to death and suffering, taught Paul a whole lot about suffering and love. So when Paul looks at a crucifix and sees the suffering of Christ, he also sees the love of Christ. These are

inseparable. Paul never looked at a crucifix and saw merely what was on the surface. He had the ability to see deeper than the scars and the blood into the compassion, mercy and love Jesus exuded while suffering. Perhaps this is one reason he stressed physical discipline. For the challenge of such a practice can't be to merely tolerate pain or survive the ascetical practice, it must be to transcend the physical pain into something greater. So the practice of the strong asceticism of that time was to help one differentiate, to find the deeper drive and motivation beyond physical discomfort. If one can do this in their own personal life then how will it affect their prayer? Personally, I see this happening quite frequently when I look at a mother and her child. Many times, I've watched a mother go through tremendous physical suffering motivated by the stronger drive that is love and compassion. And if I'm aware of this in my own life, how does it affect my prayer?

On several occasions Paul of the Cross will write, 'The passion of Jesus is the greatest work and sign of God's love'. For Paul this is not something he tries to prove, it is something deep in his core belief. He will repeat it in many of his letters to many of his spiritual followers. Frequently when they write about their own personal sufferings, Paul will redirect their interpretation, inviting them to try to begin to see it as a gift from God, something that will allow them to begin pondering more deeply the Passion of Jesus. To one of his most trusted benefactors he writes, 'I am totally immersed in that

The things that lead to growth can be uncomfortable

bottomless abyss of divine love and in the Red Sea of the most holy Passion of Jesus. This sea comes from the infinite love of God'.

A second area of faith conviction we see in Paul is the belief that most of the things that happen to us from God are good, but not necessarily good in terms of our own human definition of good. Frequently, the things that challenge us the most and



Our mission aims at evangelising others by means of the Word of the Cross. In this way, all may come to know Christ and the power of His resurrection, may share in His sufferings and, becoming like Him in His death, may be united with Him in glory (Passionist Constitutions, 3)

eventually lead to growth can be most uncomfortable. In Paul's letters and in counselling, he frequently invited people to trust the 'Divine good', and allow that Divine good to take them where they perhaps may not necessarily want to go (The Cross).

Paul writes, 'Do not be disturbed by the passing trials you are going through, since you must know that similar trials will come often. Our divine Saviour visits those servants who are dear to him and purifies them with trials to develop their fidelity'. And in another letter, 'The words of God always meet with opposition so that the divine magnificence may shine forth. It is when things appear to be crashing to the ground that you will see them even more be raised on high'.

The problem some will have with Paul's convictions deals with the question of a human being's free will. If God is one who directs all things, then how can it be that we have free will to choose? Paul's answer to this is quite beautiful. While he knows many volumes have been written trying to

explain this tension, Paul in a very beautiful way, leaves it a mystery, because he believes both are true. Yes, God guides and directs and yes, we have free will. He never tries to reconcile the two statements; he simply has the common sense to leave it alone. His goal and main interest is to lead people to God.

A third and very strong faith conviction that Paul operated under was the belief that God is doing something in everybody's life every single moment of every single day. We may not always be conscious of it, but below the surface there is always some kind of divine presence and activity sometimes encouraging us and sometimes prodding us. We may find ourselves fully participating with it, or we may find ourselves resisting. Nonetheless, God's presence is there at work. Paul writes, 'Remain in the divine presence in everything you do. If you are busy at work with your hands, let your mind and heart be inwardly on God'. And in an-

A relationship of divine love is calling us

other place, 'Be at peace in your sufferings without trying too hard to understand them in your mind. A true servant of God is praying always. I don't mean kneeling down, but with loving attention to the divine presence. In so far as this involves a lack of feeling of God's presence, so much the better'. Strong faith certainly has very little to do with making one feel okay, rather it is more about finding obedience in a relationship of divine love that is perpetually calling us.

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St Paul of the Cross and Faith

Father Paul of the Cross was favoured by God not only with the faith so necessary for all who desire to be saved, but with that special gift which exalts and distinguishes the faith of the saints. He entered very early into the school of the sanctuary, where he learnt how to contemplate the deep meaning of the sacred dogmas of his creed and how to fulfill in actions what he professed in words. The maxim, which he there first understood, was ever afterwards his favourite advice to his disciples, 'Walk in faith; walk in faith'. He inculcated the same in his letters, 'Oh, how much do I love!' he wrote, 'those souls who walk in pure and simple faith, abandoned in the hands of God. Above all, do I desire that we should all walk in faith. It is the only true way.'

It would seem that Almighty God had chosen Father Paul of the Cross, in a special manner, to teach people how to seek Him in the interior of their hearts. 'Some there are', he used to say, 'who visit with great devotion holy places and solemn shrines. I do not condemn their piety, but I would remind them that faith teaches us that our own interior is



St Vincent Mary Strambi CP lived in the community at Sts John and Paul, Rome, with St Paul of the Cross during the last years of the Passionist founder's life. After St Paul's death, Vincent became the Postulator of his Cause of Canonisation and his first biographer

also a sanctuary because it is the living temple of God and the dwelling of the most Holy Trinity. Let us enter, then, into this temple and adore our Lord there in spirit and in truth. This is a most sublime devotion.' He spoke of these things with so much

**Where the Cross is raised, there is raised the sign that that place
has now been reached by the Good News of Man's salvation
through Love. Where the Cross is raised, there is the sign
that evangelisation has begun**

Blessed John Paul II, Homily, 9 June 1979

energy and devotion that his brethren never grew tired of hearing him. With the same lively faith, he sometimes exclaimed, 'The kingdom of God is within you. Fail not to renew this belief when you study, when you work, when you eat, and when you sleep, saying in spirit, "O Infinite Bounty!" or any other ejaculation which your heart may suggest.' He once said to a soul whom he directed, 'The same great God, who for our love was made man, is nearer to you than your skin is to your flesh, closer than you are to yourself.' Ultimately, Father Paul's faith was so animated and so deeply felt, that he seemed scarcely able to express it in words.

from the Life of Paul of the Cross by St Vincent Strambi, Book II, Chapter 1

New Evangelisation

Faith which becomes effective through charity (cf Gal. 5:6) becomes a new criterion for action which changes a person's life. Looked at this way, the solidarity we are trying to bring about within the Passionist Congregation becomes a new way of relating with each other in faith so as to give greater vitality to our mission.

The theme of the coming Synod of Bishops, 'New Evangelisation', is an occasion for the Church to reflect on itself and it is an invitation to open our hearts and eyes to the present realities in the world of today and to the capacity which the current

way of evangelising has for animating others. And even though this New Evangelisation is principally directed toward those who have distanced themselves from the Church in the historically Christian countries, this phenomenon unfortunately also exists to a greater or lesser degree where the Good News was first proclaimed in more recent centuries yet has not so far been heeded to the point of transforming the personal, family and social lives of Christians.

Hence the universal Church is faced with a challenge which involves us all, and in every country where we are present. The historical moment we are living through as a Congregation and the proximity of the General Chapter constitute a fit occasion to inject something 'new' into our mission and to our way of relating to each other which can thus become a vehicle and an instrument to achieve new modalities and expressions of our consecrated life. We may well discover a new enthusiasm and new ideas in forming new families and entities, in the conviction that life is a gift to be shared.

This is a challenge, like that faced by the scribe in the Gospel who became a disciple of the Kingdom of Heaven, to take out new and old things from the precious treasure of Tradition and the various situations found in the contemporary history of our Congregation, in consecrated life in general, in the Church and in the world itself.

Ottaviano D'Egidio CP, from the Letter of Convocation of the General Chapter 2012