

The Cross in Paul

Paul the Apostle wrote to the people in Corinth 'I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified'. The Cross was at the heart of Paul's conviction that God had achieved his ultimate purpose for creation through the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus.

Paul's letters spring from the need of small groups of first century Christians for guidance to steady them in turbulent times. The Corinthian Christians were in danger of breaking into factions because some people had told them that there were privileged ways of being Christian by holding a particular allegiance to eminent apostolic figures. Cephas (Peter), Apollos and Paul himself had such great reputations that their names are still familiar to Christians nearly two thousand years later.

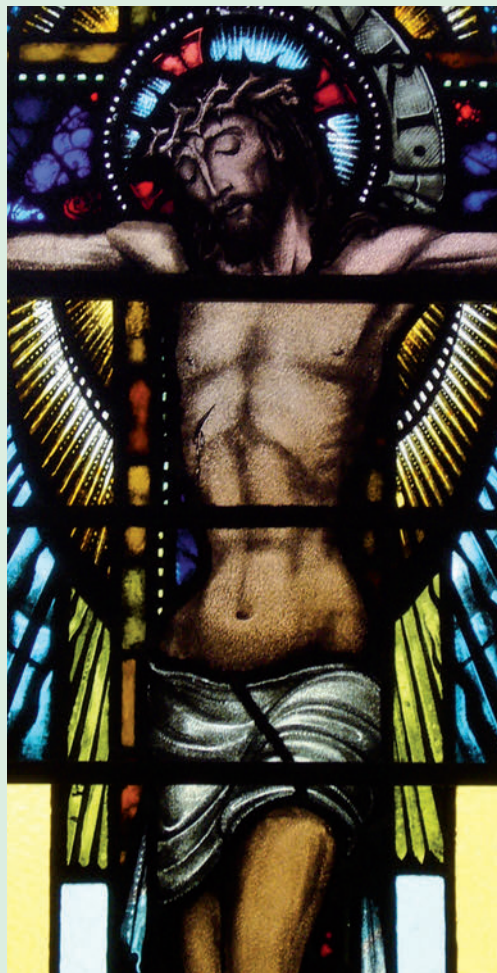
Addressing this fragmented situation Paul forged some of his most memorable phrases, including the quotation given above and the resounding – 'We preach Christ Crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor 1:23–24). When Paul speaks of Christ Crucified, he means the living Christ, who has arrived at His present state through his life, death and resurrection.*

To appreciate Paul's insights they need to be put in a fuller context of theology. God wanted to communicate

with humanity in an accessible way and so has become a human being in Jesus. Even when Jesus was rejected, He never turned away from humanity, remaining loyal to sinners while he experienced the ultimate weakness of death in the shame of a criminal execution. His loving goodness broke the power of evil and Sin. In the moment of death, the great weakness shared by all humanity, Jesus completed his earthly journey and was exalted as humanity's new Adam, the source of a new quality of life as children of the Father. The Cross is the new tree of life where love flourishes.

Paul was so convinced of God's drawing close to all humanity that he could not cease to proclaim the Cross as the centre of God's plan, to which the Father called all people. So there could be no privileged groups, neither Jews of the previous Covenant or special devotees within the emerging Christian Communities.

No one could earn God's acceptance. Paul's life modelled the gratuitousness of God's gift as he made every effort to offer the Gospel without asking any remuneration. The News he had freely received he generously passed on with a glad heart. He was proud to earn his living as a tradesman. When the Christians of Galatia, a region in modern



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day Turkey, were being told that they had to observe the customs of the Jewish Law to keep on the right side of God, Paul countered in one of his most animated letters, asserting strongly that love is a free gift which must be accepted on the terms of the beloved. God had offered his great love in Jesus' death and resurrection, announced in the preaching of Paul, and God enabled people to accept his transforming love through faith. People were called to be God's children through this liberating and ennobling offer of friendship, becoming other Christs. Paul proposed his own situation as a model for others when he wrote to the Galatians. 'I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

The friendship of God proclaimed in the Gospel gathers the Christian Community, pours out the Spirit. Entry into the Church is celebrated by sacramental sharing in the Cross, through Baptism, as the magisterial *Letter to the Romans* explains 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his' (Romans 6:3–5). This community will live celebrating Eucharist which proclaims the death of the Lord till he comes (1 Corinthians 11:26).

God's love transforms people through the effect of the Cross and summons people to live in harmony and service. In his most personal letter, Paul wrote to his great friends at Philippi, that they should have the mind of Christ, 'who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equal-

ity with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross' (Philippians 2:6–8).

For Paul the Apostle, the Cross announced definitively the boundless Love of God, revealed in human terms. This creative word gathers a community of forgiven sinners which continues to echo the living Word of the Cross through worship and service. The Cross is the great symbol which continues to gather and nourish God's people and summon them to be the Light through which the Nations can perceive the gracious plan of God.

* Greek grammar can express an action that has an enduring effect and the participle 'Crucified' is an instance of this usage.

Anthony O'Leary CP, is Associate Professor of Scripture in Milltown Institute and Invited Lecturer at St Patrick's College, Maynooth.

PAUL OF THE CROSS AND PAUL THE APOSTLE

In his book, *The Mysticism of the Passion in Saint Paul of the Cross*, Martin Bialas CP speaks of the affinity between Paul of the Cross and Paul the Apostle:

There exists in the writings of each a burning love for Christ Crucified and the Mysticism of the Passion. Their letters provide lasting evidence of this. There is also in each an untiring effort to announce to the world the liberating power of the Cross. Finally, there is their determined, but more than that, ethico-ascetical striving, not for some self-willed asceticism but for an asceticism rooted in the wonderful plenitude of Christ's Spirit and grace.

Throughout his life, Paul of the Cross retained a special reverence for this apostle and tried to 'imitate him in all things' (testimony of Brother Francis-Louis). The extent to which he succeeded is evidenced in the words of Pope Clement XIV, who called Paul Danei (of the Cross) 'a Saint Paul of our own time'.

Martin Bialas, *The Mysticism of the Passion in Saint Paul of the Cross*, (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1990) 103.



LECTIO DIVINA

Praying with the Bible

Our contact with the Word of God is not confined to liturgical celebrations. The practice of lectio divina focuses the prayerful attention of the community and the individual alike on the Sacred Scriptures. This reading deepens our awareness of the Person of Christ, and helps us grow in knowledge of him; it supplies the well springs of personal prayer, and sheds new light on the meaning of life.

(Passionist Constitutions, 47)

Lectio Divina possesses a long history, a living history. The practice of Lectio goes back to Jesus himself beginning his ministry in Nazareth at the local synagogue when he took up the scroll of the book of Isaiah and interpreted it for himself and the people listening to him: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' (Lk 4:21). It was a method much loved and practised by, among others, Saint Jerome and the Alexandrian Fathers of the Church. It was written by Saint Benedict into his rule in the sixth century and described as one of the continual labours of the monk. One of the most celebrated descriptions of it is by the Carthusian Guigo in the eleventh century.

With the advent of the Reformation, Lectio Divina fell into abeyance with the emphasis in the practice of prayer on more cerebral and analytical approaches. Paul of the Cross and his brother John Baptist can be seen to be in radical contrast to these prevailing attitudes to both teaching and practising prayer. These men, with their unusually deep familiarity with the Scriptures, taught a method of prayer profoundly centred on the humanity and experience of Jesus and its relevance for the person praying both individually and contemporaneously. These first Passionists can be seen to be part of living history and continuation of the history of Lectio Divina.

What is Lectio Divina?

Lectio Divina is not a panacea for prayer. It is not just reading Scripture, nor the scientific or exegetical study of Scripture. It is not meditation on a biblical theme or passage.

The aim of Lectio Divina is 'the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ' (Phil 3:8). Saint Jerome says that 'ignorance of scripture is ignorance of Christ' (quoted in *Dei Verbum*, 6). Lectio Divina leads us to meet God on God's terms. It is a dialogue between God and man:

'For we speak to him when we pray and he speaks to us when we read the divine oracles' (Saint Ambrose, quoted in *Dei Verbum*, 25). The practice of Lectio Divina leads to discovery of God's will. The ultimate aim is that of all prayer: the transformation of the one who prays into Christ.

Obstacles to Lectio Divina include the desire for quick results, reading too much too quickly, and a one sided attitude to education, insisting on intellectual processes (trying to form concepts and storing masses of information) to the detriment of the intuitive and affective side.

So what is Lectio Divina? It is a way of praying the Bible: a special type of spiritual reading that leads to conversion, to a change of heart. It is an unhurried, meditative sort of reading that engages the whole person and helps us to be in communion with God. It is not important for giving us new ideas but for what we become. There is a certain disinterestedness about it. We do not seek material for an essay or sermon, or knowledge for answering questions, or arguments for a debate or anything else beyond the reading itself. It engages the whole person ... not just the mind but the imagination, the heart and the body (it involves the lips and the eyes).

The Four Steps of Lectio Divina

Your practice of Lectio Divina should always begin with a prayer to the Holy Spirit. The four steps are Lectio, Meditatio, Oratio, Contemplatio.

Lectio – Take a biblical text (you can use one of the Readings of the Mass for the day; on a Friday you may want to concentrate on the Passion of Christ in one of the Gospels). Read the text several times, perhaps out loud. Keep attending to it 'listening with the ears of the heart' (Rule of Saint Benedict). Let the words resonate within you until you can almost memorise them. We see the Scriptures as the history of God's love for his people, so this

is God speaking to me now. At this stage we are asking 'What does it mean?' and so are seeking an intellectual understanding primarily, yet our heart is being exposed to the influence of these words. Can I relate this word to other biblical passages?

Meditatio – What is the word asking of me? What is its mystical or spiritual meaning for me? Here we are digging deeper for the hidden treasure and allowing it to become very personal. How does this text affect my relationship with God? Does it invite me to open my experience and horizons wider than my tunnel vision? Is there a message here not just for me but for the community to which I belong or the people with whom I live and work?

Oratio – So far God has been addressing me, now it is my turn to speak directly to him and respond to his Word. Do I wish to praise him, make thanksgiving, petition, make intercession, repent? It can be a good idea to use some of the very words and phrases in the biblical text. Perhaps I am moved to serve him better ... maybe a favourite psalm will come to mind which expresses how I feel so I pray it; the more personally I speak to him, the better.

Contemplatio – This step is described variously as resting in silence before the Lord, simply acknowledging the presence of the Other before whom words fail and adoration comes spontaneously. Perhaps I could read the text again and allow the joy of his presence to move me and love him more deeply. It may well be at this stage that I can only present myself to God without sensible awareness but in unguarded faith and trust.

Thomas Scanlon CP

The First Passionists and the Bible

In his *Life of Father John Baptist of Saint Michael the Archangel*, Father Giammaria (John Mary) Cioni writes of the early years of the apostolate of Saint Paul of the Cross and his brother, Father John Baptist, in the region of Portercole and Orbetello:

But as they had but few books and fewer still of sermons, their most telling sermons, their most telling ideas and penetrating matter were partly the fruit of their fervent meditation on Scripture, but above all, the revealed truths, the inexhaustible fountain of the sure principles and solid maxims for Christian life. On Saturday evening they set off to communicate the

results of the previous week's study of the Scriptures and what they had learned in meditating at the heavenly source, all this they imparted to the Lord's poor sheep of the neighbouring district.

Father Giammaria also quotes one of the witnesses at Saint Paul's canonisation processes who said:

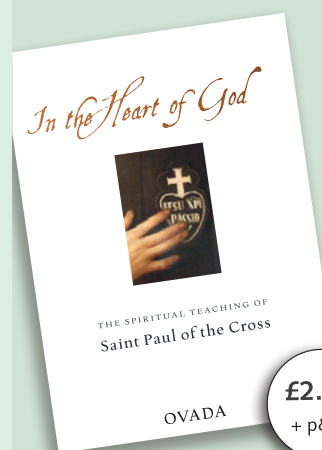
I, Father Bernardine of Saint Anne, truthfully attest that I have known Father John Baptist of Saint Michael, brother of Father Paul of the Cross, for a man of great faith who continually read the Sacred Scriptures and spoke of revealed truths with wonderful fervour; his discourses usually were all based on Scripture.

When we read Father Giammaria's *Life of Father John Baptist*, we see how the first Passionists did not simply read books of meditations (as would have been more usual in the eighteenth century) but used the Bible to nourish their life of prayer:

Not only did they imitate the ancient solitaries in vigils, austerities and penances, and Elias in zeal, in prayer and fervour, in solitude and study and meditation on the Sacred Scriptures. The time they had free from exercises in common they spent in the most retired places of solitude: they took with them usually the Sacred Scriptures which they called the book of true enlightenment; they settled in some thicket where without hindrance they read the Scriptures, or contemplated its truths, or finally burning with Divine Love and zeal for the greater glory of God they gave vent to sweet tears of devotion drawn by the Divine Fire they found in the Word of God.

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