

The Charism of the Congregation of Passion, (Holy Cross Province)

Our Founder, St. Paul of the Cross founded the Congregation of the Poor of Jesus to keep alive the Memory of the Passion of Jesus Christ and entrusted us with a mission: to preach the Gospel of the Passion by our life and apostolate.¹ The sole reason the Congregation was born in the Church was to promote the life-giving memory of the Passion of Jesus in the people of God.²

Paul was totally convinced of the transforming power of meditation on the Passion; this was what he felt he had to offer people.³ In the words of St. Paul of the Cross: “The most efficacious means for the conversion of sinners and for the sanctification of souls is the frequent remembrance of the Passion of Jesus Christ, from the forgetfulness of which proceed deplorable evils and disorders.”⁴

For Paul, the Memory of the Passion is the loving and sorrowful contemplation of what Jesus, our God-made-man, has done and suffered for us. This understanding of the Memory of the Passion gives rise to what he sees as our characteristic apostolate: the promotion of the Memory of the Passion.⁵

What Paul is talking about is contemplating and bringing others to that same experience of contemplation, or, to put it more simply, a Passionist in Paul’s mind is someone who is a person of prayer and a teacher of prayer.⁶ One of the chief objects of our Congregation is not only to pray for ourselves, that we may be united to God by charity, but also to lead others to the same point, instructing them in the best and easiest manner possible.⁷

We are to be the continuation of the life of the apostles by a contemplative-apostolic way of life firmly centered on the *memory* of the Passion of Jesus is the effective contribution which Passionists offer the Church.⁸

“May the Passion of Christ be always in our hearts” – not may the Passion of Christ be in our head, but may the Passion of Christ be always in our heart. That tells us something about the kind of memory of the Passion which Paul of the Cross was concerned with.⁹

As the Congregation grew and found identity after Paul’s death we continued to reflect on this gift which has been shared with us. We did this out of our lived experience. Our current terminology includes: Memoria Passionis (The living memory of the Passion), The Passion of Christ and it’s Power, The Passionist 4th Vow, The Crucified of Today, The Wisdom of the Cross, Lived Experience of Community, and the Rule and Constitutions, all of which have been written about after extensive reflection.¹⁰ Several elements need to be highlighted:

Recognizing in Saint Paul of the Cross the action of the Holy Spirit, the Church with her supreme authority approved our Congregation and its Rule, and entrusted us with a mission: to preach the Gospel of the Passion by our life and apostolate.¹¹

“By virtue of the specific mission that the church entrusted to us, we make our own the words of Saint Paul: ‘We preach Christ Crucified’.”¹²

Paul of the Cross used to describe the Passionist vocation in terms of growing ever more aware of the love with which Jesus laid down his life on the Cross for us. To discover this love is to be captivated by it, and drawn to make the gift of one’s own life to Christ, and to others for his sake.¹³

Perhaps it would be clearer to say that the characteristic form of ministry in the Congregation is the promotion of the memory of the Passion: bringing others to a mystical participation in the Passion of Christ, to an affective sharing in the sufferings of Jesus.¹⁴

The promotion of the memory¹⁵ of the Passion is made possible by the form of life which Paul of the Cross establishes. (Speaking of the structure of Community and the essential components of prayer, penance and solitude.)

“Whether clerics or brothers, all of us share the same Passionist vocation, and are called to live in community as equal sons of the same Father. Together we strive to keep alive in our minds and hearts the memory of the Passion, each according to his particular role of service in the Church and in the Congregation.¹⁶ In our continual efforts to follow Jesus Crucified, we are supported and guided by our Constitutions”¹⁷ (Const. 100).

“The spirituality of the Congregation, centered in the revelation of God’s love in the Passion of Jesus, strongly tends to contemplation and mystical union with God, which is considered as a gift implicit in its vocation because necessary for the total fulfillment of its charism.”¹⁸ (See Endnote number 7).

“We seek the unity of our lives and our apostolate in the Passion of Jesus.”¹⁹

We Passionists make the Paschal Mystery the center of our lives. This entails a loving commitment to follow Jesus Crucified, and a generous resolve to proclaim His Passion and death with faith and love. His Passion and death are no mere historical events. They are ever-present realities to people in the world of today, "crucified" as they are by injustice, by the lack of a deep respect for human life, and by a hungry yearning for peace, truth, and the fullness of human existence.²⁰

Developments on the Charism: Throughout the growing years of this Congregation, the development of what the Memory of the Passion means continues to expand its understanding. Yet the perpetual emphasis is being rooted in the Cross of Christ. We have a rich foundation in sacred scripture, theology and Passionist spirituality.

“The power of the Cross, which is the wisdom of God, gives us strength to discern and remove the causes of human suffering.”²¹

The spirit which we call Passionist is not static. It grows and develops; it responds to new situations, to new needs, to new cultures.²²

The Passionist spirit is not being remembered today as something which is long-since passed. We remember the past and see ourselves as part of that living tradition, and together we seek the way to live that spirit today.²³

It should be emphasized that for the first time in the history of the Congregation, our peculiar vow is formulated from the Memory of the Passion. The vow has a two-fold objective: that of continuously remembering (personal dimension), and that of promoting the memory (apostolic dimension).²⁴

We receive this gift and follow its developments precisely because of the foundations which we acknowledge. This Charism of the Passion of Jesus is fittingly:

- Rooted in the Scriptures of the Passion of Jesus²⁵
- Supported by a rich understanding of the Theology of the Cross
- Wrapped in a spirituality of the Passionists²⁶

Other elements of Wisdom:

I would therefore say that the power of the Cross takes various forms which express its influence.

- A Power of attraction “When I am lifted up, I will draw all things to myself” (cf. what was said above).
- A Power of example Cf. Phil. 2:1, “Have in you that mind which was in Christ Jesus.”
- A Norm of action “Whatever you did to the least of these my brothers, you did to me.”
- An Insight into the misfortunes of mankind, which makes us see in these least ones, the hidden “I” who dwells in them.
- A Force which inspires an activity which transforms, sustaining its dynamism and giving it a more than human motivation.

- but also, A Force for detachment, for critical judgment, which invites us to a forgetfulness of self (“do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing”), and to distancing ourselves from the work of our own hands.

As can be seen, this power is clearly of value to each one of us, in that it is able to draw our life together around a center which prevents us from being pulled apart. As was noted above, each one relates to the Cross in his or her own way.²⁷

Finally, that which determines (or specifies) us, insofar as we are Passionists, is the capacity for enthusiasm and, consequently, the degree of ought-to-be and ought-to-do that the Passion of Christ frees in us. If the same fire that consumed St. Paul of the Cross is not in us, hope is useless.²⁸

When people come to a retreat house, you don’t make them feel anything, but you set up the environment which promotes a certain experience, the experience which you are hoping they will be able to enter into during the time they are there. In that sense, you cannot give the memory of the Passion to someone else; all you can do is set up an environment which will help you to promote this experience of the memory of the Passion of Christ.²⁹

Thus, the most succinct way to express our charism is union with Christ Crucified – our own personal, ever deepening conformity to Christ in His life, passion, death, resurrection; and also drawing other souls to know and be united with Christ in the same way; so that all of us may ultimately be drawn into that eternal embrace of the Father where Christ, Crucified and Risen, dwells. This is the life and vocation of every Passionist.³⁰

Essential Truths from the Charism Working Group: Before all else we take time to pray and meditate on the Passion of Christ, whether this is done with the reading of scripture, praying before a crucifix, lectio divina, mental prayer, spiritual reading, the Passion of Jesus is the most overwhelming work of God's love.³¹ Moreover, “If the message of the Cross has not first penetrated our own lives, we ought not presume to proclaim it to others”³²

That which we term “Charism” is pure gift of God. What then do we do with this gift? How are we to share it? We share it to build up the Body of Christ. It must be understood that the Passionist Charism isn’t our mission, nor is it our ministry. It is the divine energy propelling us through formation, collaboration and ministry.

- **Formation:** Our charism is understood, and deepened through on-going formation, generating within us a profound sense of gratitude for this gift.
- **Collaboration:** Our charism, is expressed in collaboration. It is in collaboration that we help one another through dialogue and mutual support to discern how we are to express the charism in our own unique way and circumstances.

- **Ministry:** In ministry, our charism becomes specific, real, and incarnational in the manner in which we will serve the suffering and crucified among us.

The sharing of this Passionist Charism, whether it be stories or personal reflections, truly is deep and abundantly rich soil. Those on the working group feel touched by God when we share with each other at this level. The sharing of the Charism, as each of us has come to understand it, builds unity amidst our differences. Yet isn't this what St. Paul of the Cross envisioned when he encouraged the religious to be teachers of prayer? We Passionists have been given the ability or need to bring people into the journey of contemplation on the mystery of the Passion; to be teachers of praying with the Passion of Jesus always before us. For in doing so we are blessed with a deeper understanding of the wealth of this mystery and the Memory of the Passion remains dear to our heart.

Author's note:

After numerous hours of reading, research and referencing, the above work feels too much like a term paper or a dissertation. And sadly, that **is not** what the Charism of the Passion is supposed to be about. The Charism is most alive when it is lived. For me the best moments of ministry is when we help others reflect on their experience in light of the Passion of Christ and this illumination allows that person to reinterpret the same experience with new lenses and a new story, that being the deeper understanding of what the Passion of Jesus Christ means to us. But this can't be done without first prayerfully taking the Passion of Jesus Christ into our own hearts.

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- 1 Rule and Constitutions of the Congregation of the Passion of Jesus Christ, Chapter 1, "Fundamentals of our Life", #2, Rome, 1984. page 104.
 - 2 Fabiano Giorgini, C.P., *Studies in Passionist History and Spirituality*, Vol. 01: "St. Paul of the Cross The Congregation of the Passion of Jesus-What it is and What it Wants to Do." (Rome: Passionist Generalate, P.zza SS. Giovanni e Paolo 13, 1982) page 2. See also Paul's "Accounts" sent to friends for the purpose of making the Congregation known. 1768, n. 3
 - 3 Paul Francis Spencer, C.P., *Studies in Passionist History and Spirituality*, Vol. 29: "Elements of Passionist Spirituality" (Rome 1992: Passionist Generalate, P.zza SS. Giovanni e Paolo 13, 1992) page 9.
 - 4 Account of 1768, published by Fabiano Giorgini, C.P., *Studies in Passionist History and Spirituality*, "Vol. 01: "St. Paul of the Cross: The Congregation of the Passion of Jesus-What it is and What it Wants to Do." (Rome: Passionist Generalate, P.zza SS. Giovanni e Paolo 13, 1982) page 9.
 - 5 Paul Francis Spencer, C.P. page 9.

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- 6 Rule and Constitutions of the Congregation of the Passion of Jesus Christ, Rome, 1984, p.12. Costante di S. Gabriele (Brovetto) c.p., "La vita contemplativa secondo S. Paalodella Croce", La vita contemplativanellaCongregazione della Passione, Teramo, Edizioni "Eco", 1958, page78.
 - 7 Paul Daneo, *Rules and Constitutions for the Congregation of Discalced Clerics of the Most Holy Cross and Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. Chapter 1, "On the End of the Congregation" The Rule of 1775.
 - 8 Fabiano Giorgini, C.P. page 3.
 - 9 Paul Francis Spencer, C.P., Studies in Passionist History and Spirituality, Vol. 29: "Elements of Passionist Spirituality" (Rome 1992: Passionist Generalate, P.zza SS. Giovanni e Paolo 13, 1992) page 8.
 - 10 To better promote the knowledge and history of the spirituality of the Congregation especially among the English speaking members, the 1978 Passionist General Chapter chose to document its wisdom base in a series entitled "Passionist History and Spirituality." This 35 volume set is available in many of our monasteries and online. Fabiano Giorgini states that "The hope then is not backward looking, but toward the future: through a better understanding of our past and present, to give a better life to others." If only he knew how useful and educational our working group has found this material. He concludes with such inspirational words I must include them. "Besides, there is too much of the dynamism of the Spirit of God in the life of St. Paul of the Cross, the history of the Congregation, and our past and present shadings of spirituality, ever to be fully caught in words or booklets. We are dealing with the response of people like ourselves to God's love and to the call of holiness as revealed to us in Jesus crucified and risen."
 - 11 Rule and Constitutions, Chapter 1. #2. "Fundamentals of our Life"page 103.
 - 12 Rule and Constitutions Chapter 4. #64 "Apostolic Community" Page 140.
 - 13 Fabiano Giorgini, C.P. , C.P., Studies in Passionist History and Spirituality, Vol. 15: "Conditions for becoming People of Prayer in the Teaching of St. Paul of the Cross." (Rome: Passionist Generalate, P.zza SS. Giovanni e Paolo 13, 1983) page 3.
 - 14 Paul Francis Spencer, page 9.
 - 15 For references to the biblical understanding of Memory and Living Memory see Eugene Delaney, C.P. "The Content of the Memory", Studies in Passionist History and Spirituality (Rome 1992: Passionist Generalate, P.zza SS. Giovanni e Paolo 13, 1992)Vol. 20 page 29.
 - 16 Eugene Delaney, C.P., Studies in Passionist History and Spirituality, Vol. 20: "The Memory of the Passion in the Constitutions" (Rome 1992: Passionist Generalate, P.zza SS. Giovanni e Paolo 13, 1992) page 28.
 - 17 Rule and Constitutions Chapter 6. #100. "Constitution of the Congregation" Page 158.
 - 18 Fabiano Giorgini, *History of the Passionists*, p. 301-302; cf. *Reg. et const.* 2/I-III/34-41

19 Rule and Constitutions, Chapter 1. #5. "Fundamentals of our Life" page 106.

20 Rule and Constitutions Chapter 4. # 65. "Apostolic Community" page 140.

21 Rule and Constitutions. Chapter 1. #3 "Fundamentals of our Life" page 105.

22 Paul Francis Spencer, C.P. page 20. He continues, "This is what we see, for example, in the life of Elizabeth Prout (Mother Mary Joseph): the ability to bring that Memory of the Passion into the situation of the poor, into the lives of those who are suffering, and to see Christ in them. In our own time this has been further developed by the Sisters of the Cross and Passion with the establishment of St. Gemma's Hospice in Leeds. Our recent General Chapter brings us new perspectives on the Passion of Christ and on the spirituality of the Passionists. We are called to respond to the challenges of today's world, but to do so within the context of a living tradition. We have something which has been handed down to us, and in our own life, in the unfolding of the story of our lives, it will take a little bit more shape, and we too will hand on that spirit. After 150 years, what was begun by Dominic continues in these islands. The Passionist spirit is not being remembered today as something which is long-since past. We remember the past and see ourselves as part of that living tradition, and together we seek the way to live that spirit today."

Certainly we've seen this in Holy Cross Province with ministries such as Stauros, the Passionist Earth and Spirit Center, the Passionist JPIC office to name a few examples.

23 Paul Francis Spencer page 20.

24 Antonio M. Artola, C.P., Studies in Passionist History and Spirituality, Vol. 20: "The Memory of the Passion in the Constitutions" (Rome 1986: Passionist Generalate, P.zza SS. Giovanni e Paolo 13, 1992) page 9.

25 Beginning with the Passion readings of the four gospels, Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, and moving to supportive readings of the Pauline letters, Isaiah's Suffering Servant, etc.)

26 Paul Francis Spencer's Definition "We can say, then, that Passionist Spirituality is a spirituality rooted in the experience of St. Paul of the Cross, which teaches a particular way of relating to the Passion of Christ, and in which community life is not subordinate to apostolic availability" page 6.

27 Stanislaue Breton, C.P., Studies in Passionist History and Spirituality, Vol. 28: "The Passion of Christ and its Power" (Rome 1992: Passionist Generalate, P.zza SS. Giovanni e Paolo 13, 1992) page 12.

28 Stanislaus Breton, C.P., Studies in Passionist History and Spirituality, Vol. 6: "The Passionist Congregation and its Charism" (Rome 1992: Passionist Generalate, P.zza SS. Giovanni e Paolo 13, 1992) page 18.

29 Paul Francis Spencer, page. 10

30 Sister Cecilia Maria, C.P., "Swimming in the Sea of Christ's Passion: Insights into Our Passionist Charism from a Contemplative Perspective" Retreat conference give to the Houston Retreat Center Board. St. Joseph's Monastery, Whitesville, Kentucky. October 4, 2018.

31 Paul's letter to Colomba Gertrude Gandolfi, (# 1038) San Angelo. August 21, 1756.

32 Rule and Constitutions, Chapter 1 # 9 page 109.