

MEMORIA PASSIONIS

VISIONING THROUGH THE LENS OF THE CROSS

**Provincial Chapter
Holy Cross Province
June 6, 2019**

Dear brothers and sisters, thank you for the privilege of offering some reflections to you in this day of prayer—and I am grateful, too, to be able to do this in tandem with Faith.

Deep within our Passionist charism is a call to contemplation. We remember how important this was to our founder, Paul of the Cross. Our residences were to be called “retreats” where we would renew our spirits and our courage through a time of reflection and prayer. Our rooms were intended to give us a place of quiet where we could encounter the presence of God. Our latest General Chapter exhortation seems to echo this key element of our tradition in urging our communities to be “schools of prayer.”

Contemplation, we know, is not a flight from reality but a deeper and truer gaze into our world and all its dimensions. Contemplation means seeing with the eyes of our minds and souls wide open—in the words of the Letter to the Ephesians, “seeing with the eyes of the heart.”

For us as Passionists, such contemplation is not generic but is profoundly connected with the passion of Jesus. Another way of expressing

our charism is that we are to keep alive the “*memoria passionis*”—the “memory of the passion.” Not “memory” simply in an archival sense, in the sense that if we don’t properly remember this past event, it will be lost to history. No, the kind of “memory” we are talking about is a dynamic consciousness that not only remembers the past but guides the way we see the world around us, now and in the future.

An incident I came across while watching the evening news a few years ago defines for me this type of dynamic and active sense of “memory.” The scene was a press conference that a man and his family had as he was being discharged from a hospital in Detroit. The man, an auto worker on a Ford assembly line, had been hospitalized awaiting a heart transplant, when he learned that his daughter had been killed tragically in an automobile accident in Tennessee. On her driver’s license was the notation: “organ donor.” The man’s wife and physician came to him and posed an incredible choice—would he accept his daughter’s heart? At first, he said, I could not bear to think of it but then his wife said, what do you think your daughter Laura would want? And he agreed. And he had the transplant and it was a perfect fit. And now he was going home. And one of the reporters asked him, “What difference does it make to you now that you have your daughter’s heart?” The man struggled for a moment to gain his composure

and then said, “Life for me will never be the same. Every moment I am alive I will remember that I carry within me the heart of one who loved me and gave her life for me.”

Ever since hearing this story, I have thought that this is what it means to bear the “memory of the passion.” Every moment to be aware of God’s overwhelming love for us and our world. To see reality through the lens of the Passion.

This is a way of summing up the very heart of the Passionist vocation—seeing the world—“visioning” the past, the future, the present--through the lens of the cross. Indeed, it points to the very nature of the Christian vocation itself—to view all reality through the passion and resurrection of Christ. Paul said it with force to his Corinthian community: “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (I Cor 2:2).

The scriptures are keen on the notion of “seeing”—seeing things through the eyes of faith, seeing things from God’s way of viewing the world. Jesus came to give sight to the blind, to make the blind see—and so, at Jesus command, the man born blind washes his eyes clear in the waters of Siloam. At Bethsaida, the touch of Jesus’ healing hands and the paste he forms from the earth make scales drop from the eyes of the blind. Blind

Bartimaeus, alone and listless by the roadside, pleads that “he may see.”

And on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus chides his chronically dull disciples: “have you eyes, but do not see”? Jesus the light of the world has come that we may see—see reality deeply, truly, courageously. But more than that, we are asked to see the world around us as God sees it, to see it indeed through the lens of the cross—that core reality of our Christian faith that defines who God is for us, that defines the nature of the human condition, that defines our destiny as children of God.

For some time now, we as a Province have been invited into a process of “visioning”—of trying to see our future and our present through the eyes of faith, through the memory of the Passion. For a few minutes as we begin our work at this chapter, allow me to think out loud with you, as a fellow Passionist, about what it might mean to view our reality at this moment in our history through the lens of the cross.

There are three perspectives, I believe, that become acutely visible when we view reality through the lens of the cross of Christ: first we realize our common mortal humanity, secondly, we confront the reality of sin and the need for conversion, and, finally, we can savor the triumph of love and resurrection. Allow me to offer a few words about each of these three dimensions.

I. Our Mortal Humanity....

What is the cross first and foremost? What did it mean for Jesus and his contemporaries? There is no doubt about this—the cross was a sign of death, a cruel and painful death even. A form of capital punishment viewed by Romans as the most degrading form of death: “mors turpissima crucis” in the words of Cicero. No matter how we may bejewel the cross and no matter how it has been transformed in its meaning through faith, the fact is that the cross began as a sign of death and this is where we, too, should begin to think of its meaning.

By raising the specter of death so vividly before us, the cross reminds us of our common humanity, our mortal being, our limitations. This was certainly so for the earliest Christian theology—the assertion that Jesus had been crucified, that he had died on the cross, was the surefire guarantee of his authentic humanity. Paul uses the catchphrase “death on a cross” to anchor his assertion about the humanity of Jesus. The exalted early Christian hymn of Philippians begins with Jesus in the form of God and taking the form of a slave—but this is not Gnostic play-acting as a human being—Jesus truly endures death-- “death on a cross,” as Paul adds to the hymn. This startling and scandalous reality of the cross is the wisdom of God, Paul acclaims, because it makes clear that Jesus is one with us and dies

for us. This reality of death on the cross is what gives surety to the Johannine claim: The Word became flesh.”

And so, if we look at reality through the lens of the cross, one of the very first things we must see is the reality of our humanness, our common humanity before God, our “weakness” as Paul the Apostle often referred to it. We are bodily beings, limited, capable of great beauty but also inflicted with suffering and loss. Beneath all of our accomplishments and cultural differences, beneath all of our unique experiences and expertise, lies our common humanness—one that we share with the cow herder in Tanzania and the rocket scientist in Tokyo, with the high fashion model in Paris, and the day laborer in Los Angeles. The fact that we are called Passionists, that we are vowed religious or ordained priests, or part of the extended Passionist family of lay collaborators and friends, or anything else, does not take away the fundamental fact that we are first and foremost human beings created by God and sharing our humanity with all the children of God in the universe.

Contemplating reality through the lens of the cross might help us plant our feet firmly on the earth and give us a sense of compassion. As Chesterton said many years ago in a wonderful essay on “eating too much”—we are all at sea and we are all seasick.

Why is this fundamental dimension of the cross important as we Passionist gather to assess our present and to plan for the future? We above all—we who embrace the cross as the essence of our charism—should not be shocked by our common humanness as a community. We should not be shocked or scandalized by the specter of death—for ourselves individually or even as a community. We should not be intolerant of our weakness and failures—as individuals or as a community. In a similar vein, our General Chapter exhorted us to build communities that are “schools of humanity” inclined to respect, forgiveness, mutual understanding and dialogue. We should not be impatient with our limitations—as individuals or as a community. Because we are contemplatives of the cross, we Passionists have a place for human weakness. After all, our corporate logo is not that of winged victory or an eagle brandishing spears, but the cross embedded in a human heart.

I think, in fact, this has been instinctively true for Passionists, certainly in our apostolate. We have been known as compassionate confessors, hospitable communities, not pretentious in our self-image. And this is good. And when we come to plan for the future, we should not forget our own sense of reality, our own limitations, even as we let our

imaginations and our dreams soar. The ability to dream and imagine is also part of our humanness, but such beautiful work must be rooted in reality.

In one of my very favorite books, **Becoming Human Together**, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that one of the most potent forces for breaking down community is what he calls “wish dreams,” clinging to our own version of what authentic community must be. The “wish-dreamers” are those, Bonhoeffer says, who are more in love with the ideal community of their dreams than they are with the actual community that God gives them.

So here we are—look around us—this is the community God has given us. This is the community we will live with into the future. This is the community we must cherish and with whom we can carry out God’s will for our congregation at this time in our history. Let us embrace each other and be tender with one another. Let us speak the truth to each other but do so with compassion and respect.

II. The Reality of Sin and the Need for Conversion.

Secondly, if we view reality through the lens of the cross then it is not simply a matter of being aware of our humanness, our mortality and limitations as human beings. The cross was never a neutral emblem of our common humanness. The cross was a cruel form of capital punishment, an attempt to discredit and destroy a human life. Jesus did not die in bed but on

a cross and that makes all the difference. In the case of Jesus, that crucifixion was a miscarriage of justice, an act of cruel and arbitrary power, a sinful act that struck down the very Son of God, a brutal crushing of the most beautiful human life that God ever created.

The gospels are clear that the cross of Jesus was a sign of infamy, an expression of human sinfulness. The complicity of the religious leaders, the calculating indifference and insensitivity of Pilate, the betrayal and treachery of Judas, the cowardice of Peter and the disciples—all of these wrap the cross of Jesus in the mantle of human weakness and sin. The Gospels of Luke and John go further and see lurking behind the forces that gather to strike at Jesus the power of the demonic, ultimate evil and the harbinger of death that stands opposed to everything that is divine and beautiful.

Thus, the cross of Jesus stands as a terrible symbol of human sinfulness, of the destructive power of injustice and indifference, of the capacity of humans for cruelty and oppression. It is a piercing reminder of the aching suffering of generation after generation of human beings who have been crushed by burdens of poverty and exploitation, destroyed by violence of all sorts. All of the children malnourished and abused. All of the women robbed of their dignity and freedom. All those who have had their lives snuffed out before they have had a chance to breathe. All those

killed in senseless conflicts over the ages—including in our own day, at this very moment.

Christian mystics and contemplatives throughout the ages—including Paul of the Cross—have recognized that the bloody sweat of Jesus in the garden, the flogging and torture he endured, and his anguished cry of near despair on the cross, were in reality the piercing cry of all humanity in its suffering—a suffering inflicted by sinful humanity itself. Indeed, he bore our sins and for our transgressions he was afflicted. Jesus, the Son of God and Son of Humanity, represents all of God’s children, especially in their suffering because of sin and injustice.

By remembering the passion of Jesus and seeing reality through the lens of the cross, we should be especially aware of the crucified of our world today and moved to alleviate such suffering through our mission as Passionists. This is how our own Rule and Constitutions puts it:

“We are aware that the Passion of Christ continues in this world until He comes in glory; therefore, we share in the joys and sorrows of our contemporaries as we journey through life toward our Father. We wish to share in the distress of all, especially those who are poor and neglected; we seek to offer them comfort and to relieve the burden of their sorrow. The

power of the Cross, which is the wisdom of God, gives us strength to discern and remove the causes of human suffering.” (Rules and Constitutions # 3)

While we are aware of our common humanity and compassionate towards it, we also recognize the reality of sin and human cruelty. We recognize the need for profound conversion of heart. Our corporate commitments, our preaching, our use of resources—all of these dimensions of our lives must reflect this awareness if we are to be true to the cross of Christ. However modest our efforts may be, however small may be the stream of justice that can flow from our mission, we must not abandon this part of our mission if we are to view the world through the lens of the cross.

Just a short time ago Jean Vanier passed away in France. A friend of mine sent me an email and said that notice of this man’s passing should have been on the front pages of every newspaper in the world. I think she was right. A few years ago, CTU honored Jean Vanier at our annual “Blessed are the Peacemakers” dinner. Because he did not want to live in a hotel, we had the blessing of having him stay with us in our Passionist community. If he is not a saint, I don’t know who is. For more than fifty years, he lived with the mentally disabled and was the founder of the famous l’Arche communities that bring together persons with disabilities and able-bodied people in mutual respect and love. When he spoke at a forum we had for students and

later that day addressed a large audience at a downtown hotel for the dinner, his message was the same: the desperate need in our world not to forget the poor and the marginalized. Not simply out of charity or because they are in need. But in order to be truly human ourselves we must learn from those who have nothing other than their own capacity to love. To quell the world's violence, to blunt its injustice, to roll back the growing gap between the have's and the have nots, between the powerful and the weak, he said, we must find ways to listen to the cries of the poor and to relate to them as our fellow human beings and as children of God.

I kept thinking as he spoke his simple but penetrating and moving words, this is the message of the cross—of the Crucified Jesus whose death is a challenge to world of violent power and exploitation.

III. The Cross as Sign of God's Love and as the Way to Resurrection.

There is a third and final dimension of ultimate reality that looms if we view the world and our destiny through the lens of the cross, namely that this symbol, which originated as a sign of death has, because of the Jesus who was crucified on its wood, become a sign of God's unconditional love for the world and the promise of resurrection.

As strange as it may seem—or as Paul the Apostle put it, as “foolish” as it sounds--we Christians believe that the death of Jesus is truly a sign of

God's unconditional love for the world. The Gospel of John interprets the death of Jesus precisely in this way: "No greater love than this than to lay down one's life for one's friends..." To offer one's life for another; to risk even death for the sake of another—is the ultimate sign of human love and devotion. No one can ask for more. Christians understand the cross as signifying that powerful and overwhelming message about the quality of God's love for the world, revealed and exemplified in the death of Jesus for others. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him."

Jesus' own willingness to give his life for others becomes as well the fundamental ethic for the followers of Jesus. This is the powerful message that Pope Francis states at the very beginning of his exhortation, "The Joy of the Gospel." At the heart of Christian life, he notes, stands a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, the one who is the human face of the Father's mercy, the one who embodies the unlimited and unconditional love of God for us, the Word made flesh. But, the Pope noted, in discovering this Jesus who is the embodiment of such love, we also encounter what it means to be truly human. As Christians we believe that true humanness, true greatness is defined by our capacity to give our lives for the sake of others, to move beyond ourselves and relate with generosity and love with the other. As the

pope so eloquently put it: “Life grows by being given away, and it weakens in isolation and comfort. Indeed, those who enjoy life most are those who leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating life to others”

In the words of Jesus: “To lose your life is to save it.” This is not servile self-denial, but true love—transcending ourselves for the sake of the other. Something done on a daily basis—sometimes heroically and dramatically, sometimes routinely in a thousand acts of goodness and self-sacrifice for one’s child, one’s spouse, one’s friend.

We believe that this teaching and example of Jesus is not a mere sectarian perspective valid only for Christians but is a revelation of the true nature of the human person before God. To transcend one's own needs and concerns and to give one's life out of love for the other is the most noble and defining character of the Christian human being in the eyes of God.

We know there are a lot of examples of this in our world today, examples of heroic virtue, of giving one's life for the other that are abundant and so eloquent. We think of “first responders”—the health care workers, the police, the firefighters, ordinary citizens-- who risk their lives—going into burning buildings when others are running out. I think of a scene I saw on the news just last week, a young man in Japan leaping out of his car when

he saw a child dangling from a five-story balcony, standing and catching that child when he fell. The man was struck unconscious and severely injured—the child was unharmed. I think of parents who forsake their own needs so that their children can go to college. I think of sons and daughters who defer their own plans to care for an ill or aging parent. I think of the young men and women in volunteer programs, including our own, who give a year of their lives to serve the poor in Honduras and Haiti.

We know in our hearts that the real heroes in our society, the truly great human beings are not the overpaid professional athletes or movie stars but ordinary people doing truly noble acts, acts that the teachings of Jesus tell us reveal the true character of the human spirit before God.

The Christian scholar and author Os Guinness has said that sometimes situations of horror and tragedy crack open the human heart and force the beauty out. It is in terrible times, times like these, that people with great goodness inside become most themselves. "The real mystery," he added, "is not the mystery of evil but the mystery of goodness."

This kind of noble human love is symbolized in the passion and death of Jesus; this is the profound meaning of the cross. And this is one dimension of the cross that we as Passionists do not want to forget and which we want to proclaim in our ministry on behalf of the church. When

we truly transcend ourselves for the sake of someone else, we are most truly human and bear most evidently the spark of the divine.

Finally, we believe and know that the passion of Jesus did not end with death. Keeping alive the memory of the passion, viewing reality through the lens of the cross, also means remembering that while the cross is a sign of suffering it also a sign of triumph, because love is more powerful than death. And the crucified Jesus becomes the Risen Christ. And his empty tomb is an entrance way to abundant life. Year after year in every parish throughout the world—as we did just a few weeks ago--we celebrate the Triduum, Holy Week, the core mysteries of our faith. There is Good Friday but also Easter Sunday—they cannot be separated. Jesus passes from death to life. Christianity affirms both the reality of suffering and loss and the bounty of life renewed.

There is a wonderful story told about Saint Theresa of Avila who one day was praying intensely in her room and the devil decided to attempt to deceive her. He appeared to her in the form of the Risen Christ. At first Theresa was overwhelmed with ecstasy and fell to her knees in adoration of this beautiful vision. But as she peered at the figure of Christ she suddenly stood up and said, “Get away from me, Satan! How did you know it was me, Satan replied. Theresa said, “No wounds, no wounds.” The startling

and exquisite portrayal in the gospels of Luke and John—the Risen Christ appears, his risen body luminous with glory, but he still bears his wounds. The early church knew that the Crucified Christ and the Risen Christ were one—and that the Risen Christ would never forget his wounds of love on behalf of the world.

I think we all sense we live in a time when there is a brooding sense of uncertainty, of anxiety, of waiting for the other shoe to drop. The confusing threat of terrorism and war; the senseless and shocking mass shooting that have become almost routine, even in classrooms, the terrible state of our national politics, the lack of confidence in so many of our institutions—the family, education, government, and, of course perhaps most disheartening of all, the terrible, scandalous and seeming unending wounds inflicted on the church by its own pastors and leaders.

It is a time when the church itself and we Passionists in particular cannot forget that if we are conscious of the wounds of Christ, we must also not forget the glory of Christ and God’s unbreakable promise of life. “Can anything separate us from the love of Christ?” Paul asks in his letter to the Romans. “No...for I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor

height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 8:37-39).

That conviction—that life is stronger than death, that love is more powerful and enduring than hatred, that death leads to resurrection—is a message that we need to carry with us today. Right after the terrible days of September 11 I came across a newsletter sent out by an Orthodox Jewish Rabbi in New York to his followers. The words stay with me and I would like to share a paragraph with you now:

Dear Friends,

What is the remedy to Wanton Hatred? Our rabbi of righteous memory answered these many times, with clarity and certitude: Wanton Love. Raw, cold-blooded, fanatical, baseless, relentless hatred can be matched and combated only with pure, indiscriminating, uninhibited, unyielding, baseless, unsolicited love and acts of kindness.

But we need not just plain love. We need love that costs us. Love that we get nothing back for. There are people in the world that are committed to sowing their hatred. We need to be willing to lose sleep, to suffer losses, to be uncomfortable, to sacrifice our pleasures, in order to help another human being -- with at least the precision, determination and passion that Evil's compatriots employ to fulfill their mission of hate.

Every one of us can make a difference. Our Rebbe would always quote the Maimonidean adage: Each person should see himself as though the entire world is on a delicate balance and with one deed he or she can tip the scales. Only a few handfuls of evil people can seem to turn our world upside down. Let us not underestimate the power of each of us to turn it upright again.

Every good act, every expression of kindness and love, will be a thousand antibodies to neutralize the viruses put in place by the forces of evil. In response to darkness, we will fill the earth with light. To defeat evil we will saturate our globe with good.

And when we do our part G-d will surely do His part to protect us and transform our world to the one we all hope and yearn for, one that will be filled with His glory, like the waters fill the ocean.

Amen.

The cross, ultimately, is God's way of reminding us that the force of God's love is the ultimate antidote--more powerful than any force of evil or hatred or death. That is a message of hope that is the foundation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and that is the message we Passionists must strive to proclaim through the works of our ministry. The conviction of resurrection is what gives hope and meaning to the cross of Christ. We are Passionists

but we are also people of the resurrection. If we contemplate reality through the lens of the cross then we must also see our lives and our destiny in the light of the resurrection.

In a famous homily he gave at an Easter Vigil, Pope Benedict XVI compared the resurrection to a burst of nuclear fusion, a burst of energy so powerful that it brought an entirely new level of life and being into our universe: "...Christ's Resurrection," he noted, "...is the greatest 'mutation,' absolutely the most crucial leap into a totally new dimension that there has ever been in the long history of life and its development; a leap into a completely new order that concerns us, and the concerns the whole of history." The pope went on, "At the Last Supper Jesus anticipated death and transformed it into self-giving. His existential communion with God was concretely an existential communion with God's love, and this love is the real power against death, it is stronger than death. The Resurrection was like an explosion of light, an explosion of love...which ushered in a new dimension of being, a new dimension of life in which, in a transformed way, matter too was integrated and through which a new world emerges."

This conviction that the cross is the unimpeachable sign of God's love for the world, that it leads to an explosion of light and love that has changed our destiny and our world forever, is something that we should not only

preach as an essential part of our message of the cross, but is something we need to take to heart ourselves at this moment in our Passionist history. Confidence in God's love for us. Confidence that we are people of the resurrection—visioning the future in this way should ultimately dissolve our anxiety and enable us to plan and decide and build with serenity. We are not dead—we are alive. The Passionists are alive. Holy Cross province is alive. And God is with us. This is not hokum or whistling in the dark. It is the deepest conviction of our Christian faith on which we have wagered everything. Whatever should befall us. Whatever circumstances we may have to face—we will not die but live because of the Crucified Christ who gave his life for us and abides with us still.

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