

“Journeying Together in Hope—Why Signs of Life are Everywhere”

Paul Wadell/Holy Cross Province Assembly, June 9, 2021

I appreciate the opportunity to be with you today and want to thank Tim O’Brien and the planning committee for inviting me to share some reflections on what is unfolding in Holy Cross Province. Yesterday when we gathered as a Passionist family, after Fr. Joachim’s presentation, we looked back at what has happened since the 2019 Provincial Chapter, particularly last year. On this second day of the assembly, we look forward. I want to offer a theological reflection for why we, the Passionist family, can look forward not in fear and anxiety and distress, but in hope, and will do that in three ways. First, I’ll suggest that we can look forward in hope because signs of life are everywhere; they’re not isolated or sporadic, but burgeoning and expansive. Second, I’ll explain why we can trust, and even give thanks for, something we don’t yet fully understand. Third, I’ll suggest some ways we can strengthen and sustain this good and beautiful thing that is coming to life.

Signs of Life are Everywhere

If we took a reading of Holy Cross Province today and tried to describe what we saw, we would have to say that signs of life are everywhere. Something graced and promising is emerging, something new and fresh and exciting is coming to life and has been for the last few years. Instead of contracting, we’re expanding. Instead of lamenting all the things we can’t do, we’re confidently embracing new projects and programs, and joyfully exploring new possibilities. As Tim O’Brien wrote in a recent Visioning newsletter, “A tidal wave of energy

has been unleashed.” I’m not from California and I’m not a surfer, but we need to keep riding that wave!

So much creative energy has been unleashed in Holy Cross Province over the last few years that has resulted not only in new life and growth, but also in joy and confidence and enthusiasm as we continue to move from vision to action. A leadership team is talking about new forms and structures of leadership while an aptly named community in transition team is reflecting on different ways to imagine and experience Passionist community life and as a ministry team is not only exploring, but also implementing new models of ministry. A charism formation team is confirming the power and attraction of the Passionist charism as more and more people feel called to embrace it in their lives and a communications team is enthusiastically adopting new ways of sharing the good news of the Passionist family. Amidst all of this, the Laudato Si’ team regularly reminds us of the integral connection between the Passionist charism and Pope Francis’ call to see care for the earth as an indispensable part of a life of discipleship.

We see this new life in our retreat centers. Instead of concluding there was nothing they could do during the Covid pandemic, they responded with new ministries to those who were suffering and in need, and amidst a very challenging situation, found new ways of ministering to retreatants and the larger community. The same vitality is manifest in our parishes where they are responding to the signs of the times with programs on racism, the environment, and other challenges. And for many years now Passionist Alumni, through the vision and leadership of the Alumni Council, through its frequent newsletters and memorable reunions, have demonstrated again and again how resilient the bond is that joins all of us together in this Passionist family.

If we took a reading of Holy Cross Province today, we would see that new leaders have emerged because new voices have been listened to, because perhaps once overlooked talents

have been recognized, affirmed, and welcomed, and because we've grown to a deeper sense of how better things are for everybody when we acknowledge our deep interdependence and our abiding need for one another. All this has resulted in a deepening of relationships among us, a deepening of trust and comfort with one another, a recognition of how much we can learn from and be enriched by one another, and how much joy and meaning and purpose and satisfaction we experience when we come together to devote ourselves to something that truly matters. That is why it is not surprising—and why it is so fitting—that we now talk of ourselves as family.

This reading of Holy Cross Province reveals that something immeasurably hopeful is coming to life, something blessed is emerging, that needs to be recognized, affirmed, celebrated, and sustained. But it also reveals that profound and pervasive changes are underway. Dramatic shifts are taking place in how we see ourselves, in how we talk about ourselves, in how we interact, operate, and minister. There is little that is not changing, little that is not in transition. We find ourselves in a liminal space, straddled between what once was and what is not yet fully born.

Holy Cross Province today is decidedly not what it was twenty, ten, or even five years ago. We're not completely sure what the future will be, but we know Holy Cross Province cannot go back to what it was. At moments of notable transition, the temptation is to resist and pull back. That's not surprising because we know the shifts that are underway will challenge and stretch everyone. But if these signs of life are not to be extinguished and the gift that has been entrusted to us is not to die, we, as a family, must cross the threshold in order to continue journeying together in hope.

Why We Can Trust, and Even Give Thanks for, What We Don't Yet Fully Understand

So why can we trust, and even give thanks for, what we don't yet fully understand? There are many reasons, but I want to mention four. First, we've let ourselves be led by the Spirit. In 1 Thessalonians 5:19, Paul tells the Christian community there, "Do not quench the Spirit." One thing we can say for sure is that in the last few years the Passionist family of Holy Cross Province has not quenched, stifled, or resisted the Spirit; rather, we've allowed ourselves to be led by the Spirit and, in doing so, discovered that whenever the Spirit leads the result is life, energy, creativity in abundance, and joy.

We always know when we're ignoring, resisting, or trying to control the Spirit because when we do the result is not life and energy, but a gloomy lethargy. We may be comfortable in that gloomy lethargy, but we aren't really living. We're comfortable, but journeying nowhere. When the Spirit is leading, you throw caution to the wind, and in very hopeful ways something like that is happening in Holy Cross Province.

There's a parallel to the story of the newly born church that is recounted in the Acts of the Apostles. At Pentecost, the Spirit burst into the lives of the first disciples and nothing was ever the same again. In many ways, the Spirit is the central character in Acts because the early church is clearly a Spirit-led community, a community so empowered and guided by the Spirit that no decision is made without discerning how the Spirit is calling them. This trust in the Spirit results in a church that is bold, fearless, full of life, utterly committed to its mission, and joyful even amidst suffering. That something graced and hopeful is coming to life suggests that this is a Pentecost moment in Holy Cross Province.

On January 25, 1959 when Pope John XXIII surprised everyone by announcing that there would be an ecumenical council, he said the windows of the church must be thrown open to let

in the fresh air of the Spirit, and even said that the Catholic Church was in need of a second Pentecost, a rebirthing. That's exactly what happened at the Second Vatican Council. On the first day of the council, John challenged the assembled bishops to heed the promptings of the Spirit rather than be controlled by fear, pessimism, or those he called "prophets of gloom and doom" who refuse to see anything hopeful on the horizon.

In Lumen Gentium, the council retrieved the theology of the church found in the New Testament and, echoing the Acts of the Apostles and the writings of Paul, speaks of the Spirit dwelling in the church, guiding it, and endowing all of its members with an abundance of gifts. It even speaks of the Spirit "rejuvenating" and constantly renewing the church (LG 4). I'm at an age where any mention of "rejuvenation" gets my attention! I love this part of Lumen Gentium because it describes a church on a journey led by the Spirit and presents a dynamic image of the church as a living reality that, far from being listless or static, is continually unfolding, evolving, growing and developing. And that a church led by the Spirit is continually being rejuvenated suggests there should always be a youthfulness and vitality to the church, never staleness.

I used to tell my students that in the years during and immediately following Vatican II that it was an exciting time to be a Catholic. Well, it's an exciting time to be a member of the Passionist family of Holy Cross Province because so much that the council envisioned for a rebirth of the church when it described it as evolving, developing, and being rejuvenated and renewed is happening now in the province.

A second reason we can trust, and even give thanks for something we don't yet fully understand, is that we are a Passionist family—even more, we *can be* a Passionist family—only because our diverse and varied lives are grounded and centered in the charism that was entrusted

to Paul of the Cross and is now entrusted to each of us. That is what makes us one, that is what, like gravity, joins us together.

Like any family, the Passionist family of Holy Cross Province is made up of some very diverse individuals; but, like any family, that diversity is grounded in a deeper and unshakable unity. That is why no member of the Passionist family should ever feel like an outsider, why no one should ever feel second class. If any member of a family feels that, there's problems with the family. That is why we should never see one another as strangers, but as brothers and sisters bonded together by our collective conviction that the Passion of Jesus, as Paul of the Cross declared, is "the greatest and most overwhelming work of God's love" (Const. 1).

One is a Passionist because he or she feels a compelling affinity or deep resonance with the charism of the Passionists, so much so that they "take it to heart." I always felt whenever I encountered a Passionist, even if I had never met them before, that I already knew them. I always felt that as soon as I met them that a bond already existed between us—a deep familiarity—because we had taken the same gift to heart and, therefore, were companions and family members before we ever laid eyes on one another. Knowing that we had taken the same gift to heart enabled us to let down our guard, to open ourselves to one another and be relaxed and comfortable with one another, and to love one another, because thanks to that shared charism there was so much we could assume about one another.

There is a Passionist family because there are people who can say to one another, "Oh, you too?" There is a Passionist family whenever there are people who cannot be themselves without keeping alive in their hearts the memory of the Passion of Jesus. One becomes a Passionist when that deep affinity with the Passionist charism becomes an assent to it. There is a Passionist family because anyone who assents to the Passionist charism not only recognizes that

others have done the same—recognizes that we've all been entrusted with the same gift—but also that we can best embrace, enter into, and be transformed by this gift in a family where we help, support, and learn from one another.

There is a Passionist family because no one of us can completely capture or embody by ourselves the meaning of the charism. We need to see the charism reflected and embodied and brought to life in others in order to understand its richness and vitality, its beauty and power, and its continual relevance. The fact that we are joined together in one charism that is lived out in so many ways testifies to perennial relevance of the gift. But it also reminds us of what would be lost to the church and the world if there were not a family who had taken this gift to heart.

A third reason we can trust and affirm and celebrate what is coming to life is that every member of the Passionist family of Holy Cross Province shares the same story and is committed to keeping it alive. I taught courses in Christian ethics for thirty-five years and quickly became convinced that the Christian moral life is not primarily a matter of following laws and rules, but of taking on and being faithful to a story, the story of God that came first to Israel in the Old Testament and then in Jesus in the New Testament. Christians are storytellers, people who not only understand their lives in light of Christ, but who strive to become a character in that story in their own unique way. Christians are baptized into a story, a story they are convinced is worth handing on and remembering because it is good news for the world.

The same is true for Passionists. Passionists are storytellers who have taken to heart the story of Paul of the Cross and every Passionist who came after him, men and women who understand their lives in light of that story and who are absolutely convinced it is a story worth handing on, remembering, and keeping alive because it bears a message of love, hope, healing and compassion, especially for those who suffer. It is a story of universal significance.

Stories offer us accounts of what it means to be human, accounts of what we should aspire to as persons and communities. Stories are arguments about life, about where we can find the meaning and purpose that come from knowing we have given ourselves to something that matters. That is true for every Passionist. We are all incorporated into the story of Paul of the Cross, a story that continued after him, spread throughout the world, and now lives on in us. Each of us entered this story at different stages of our lives and perhaps from very different backgrounds, and we live out the story in very different ways, ways that reflect the unique circumstances of our lives, our personalities and our gifts, all of which bring energy and vitality to the story.

But, again, we are a family of Passionists precisely because we have all been formed by this story and have all taken it to heart so that we can share its powerful message to others. Right now the Passionist family of Holy Cross Province is writing its own distinctive chapter to this story, adding to it, editing here and there, as we journey together, continually discerning what does being faithful to this story ask of us now.

Fourth, there is no reason to doubt or pull back from all that is coming to life in Holy Cross Province because in letting the Spirit lead us, we're learning to love every member of this growing family, realizing how better it is for everyone when we do so. Love brings life because to love is to acknowledge that we can't go it alone. If this is to be a journey of hope, it has to be a journey we take *together*.

The opening words of the Passionist *Constitutions* tell us that "Saint Paul of the Cross gathered companions..." Paul knew what we know: Nobody becomes a Passionist on their own. Nobody becomes a Passionist single-handedly. There is no self-made Passionist because there is no way to learn, live, grow in, and be faithful to the Passionist story without the support,

guidance, love and friendship of others trying to live it as well. The very language of “family” tells us that we find life together and flourish together and live with hope only when people truly do recognize and respect one another, are willing to attend to one another and be available to one another, and only in that vibrant mutuality where everyone’s gifts are generously shared as well as genuinely welcomed.

The metaphor of journey reminds us that when we have companions walking along with us, something changes. We may start the journey as strangers, but there’s a good chance that along the way we’ve become friends. That’s because as we walk we talk, and as we talk and listen to one another, as we share more about ourselves, we come to know one another better. The distance between us shrinks, the uneasiness lessens as we become more comfortable with one another. As we take that journey together, we offer and receive the respect, encouragement, affirmation, and support that every member of the family needs. And on that journey we realize that God provides, that God blesses and gives life, counsels and consoles in and through one another if we’re willing to make whatever changes are necessary to take this journey together.

That is one way of understanding what is happening in Holy Cross Province today. We’re adjusting and adapting, talking and listening, reviewing and revising in order to do whatever is necessary for us to take this journey together. And in doing so we’re coming to love—at least that has to be our goal—every member of the family, acknowledging their uniqueness, respecting them and appreciating them, and letting them know through our attitudes, words, and actions not only that it’s good that they are with us, but also that we’re better because of them. The theologian Jonathan Edwards described love as “finding your place of belonging.” More and more people are finding “a place of belonging” in the Passionist family. We love them when we let them know that we’re glad they are here and that they truly do belong.

Strengthening and Sustaining this Good and Beautiful Thing that is Coming to Life

I want to conclude by briefly offering three ways we can strengthen and sustain this good and beautiful thing that is coming to life, three ways the Passionist family of Holy Cross Province can continue to grow together and deepen the unity that already exists among us.

First, we must have the courage to be *magnanimous*. Magnanimity is a strange-sounding and even harder to spell virtue, but also an absolutely crucial one because magnanimity helps us, both individually and communally, to achieve the greatness to which God calls us and makes possible for us. Magnanimity equips us to respond to every opportunity—and these come every day—to become more than we already are by transcending ourselves in love, kindness, and service to others.

Thomas Aquinas defined magnanimity, which literally means to be of “great soul” or “or great spirit,” as “a certain aspiration of the spirit to great things.” He went on to say that a magnanimous person as “the spirit for some great act,” which perfectly describes the kind of individuals, community, and family Passionists must be if the good work God is doing with and among us is to grow. To care for the charism that has been entrusted to us, we cannot settle for what is easiest, most convenient, or most comfortable; rather, we must be a family of “great soul,” of “great spirit,” that doesn’t give up on aspiring toward something truly great: living and proclaiming God’s love in the crucified Christ. Magnanimous people want to do their best with the gifts and opportunities provided to them. If asked why they won’t settle for less demanding ways to live, they’ll say that God and others deserve their best.

Eight years ago, in a talk he gave to students of Jesuit schools, Pope Francis said that the most important element to their education was “to learn to be magnanimous.” He said magnanimity “means having a great heart, having greatness of mind; it means having great

ideals, the wish to do great things in response to what God asks of us.” This beautiful and good thing that is coming to life in Holy Cross Province will continue to grow if we as a Passionist family are people of great heart and greatness of mind, people who refuse to forsake great ideals and who together pursue great things in response to what God asks of us. (Section on magnanimity from *Living Vocationally—The Journey of the Called Life*, by Paul J. Wadell & Charles R. Pinches, 30-31.)

Second, the Passionist family will continue to grow if it practices *creative fidelity*. The term comes from the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel who said that “an effective fidelity can and should be a creative fidelity.” Creative fidelity reminds us that caring for the Passionist charism and story requires skill, insight, imagination, innovation, flexibility, and spontaneity. Creative fidelity helps us respond wisely and well to changing circumstances and events, to challenges and obstacles, and to pretty much everything life might throw at us. With creative fidelity, we take responsibility for the future for the sake of something good that we don’t want to die. Obviously, creative fidelity requires a commitment to both personal and communal prayer and the ongoing discernment of what is being asked of us now.

Finally, we will continue this shared journey in hope if we commit to nurturing the love that is coming to life among all the members of the family. We do this when every member of the family is seen and valued. We do this when we have time for one another and are truly present to one another; in fact, Marcel described presence or availability as the core element of creative fidelity. We do this when we continue to listen and learn from one another with true openness, mutuality, admiration, and respect. We do this when we have good will toward every member of the family, seek one another’s good, and help one another along with encouragement

and support. We do this when we find opportunities for conversation and sharing with one another as well as times to celebrate and honor one another.

Frederick Buechner said that the “grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn’t have been complete without you.” We will never have to worry about the future of the Passionist family as long as we do all that we can to let every member of the family know, “It’s good that you’re here because the party would not have been complete without you.”