



**Fr. David Colhour, C.P., Provincial Superior of Holy Cross Province,  
presented the following address at the  
June 2024 Summer Assembly in Detroit, Michigan.**

Perhaps some of us here in the room remember back in 1995 when Michael Joseph Stengel, C.P., then Provincial Superior, called the special Assembly for all of the vowed men who are going to be under the age of seventy by the year 2006. It turned out to be the “2006” gathering. Of course it happened in 1996. Michael Joseph wanted to bring together the then younger men of the Province so we could have more conversation and get to know each other better because the numbers and demographics of the Province were changing.

When I joined the Province in 1986, I remember looking at a listing, and there were thirteen locations we had in the Province. And I thought I am going to spend the rest of my life in thirteen places. It felt very limiting. In many ways the Provincial leadership over the last 30 years has done a remarkable job in finding creative ways to not close houses and locations, like other Religious Orders and provinces have done.

Since 1986, when I joined Holy Cross Province, we buried 139 Vowed Passionist men.

The introduction of appreciative inquiry (about 15 years ago) has opened some doors and windows allowing us to expand as a Province. We have begun thinking of ourselves as both vowed members and lay members. With this, our numbers have expanded dramatically. And while laity can certainly do tremendously good work, and can live, preach and proclaim the Memory of the Passion, the structures of the Church do not allow them the canonical authority to fulfill the obligations of a religious congregation and, specifically, the Congregation of the Passion. There is a certain dependency the lay members have upon the vowed. Because without vowed member, Holy Cross Province will cease to exist.

I keep this in mind as now I have to think about both vowed membership and lay membership. Like I said, my time with the Passionists has seen the deaths of a lot of good men. Over the past 20 years, vowed membership has been decreasing 3-4 deaths per year.

**When I look at the vowed members of this Province, We currently have forty vowed Passionist men.**

- Nine of these are from outside the U.S. who have graciously volunteered their lives to work for some time in Holy Cross Province.
- Eleven are over eighty years of age, which is over 25%.
- By the next Chapter **if** there are NO deaths, we will have fourteen vowed men who are over eighty.
- And our Actuarial Projections show we will lose 10 more Vowed men by the Chapter of June 2027.
- Geographically we have vowed members located in seven cities. We have a few significant corporate ministries. **AND** we have men doing good work beyond the corporate ministries in areas they can utilize their talents and gifts having found a personal need and call.
- Lay members are also aging and transitioning.

**So, Asking some bigger questions,**

- What does the structure of the Province look like in the future from a civil and canonical perspective?
- Do we have the resources (money, people, equipment, etc.) to be a viable Province into the future?
- Who are the future vowed and lay leaders of the Province, and how are we preparing them for this important role?
- How do we continue to communicate who the Passionists are, and how do we invite people into the Passionist Family?

As I look at Religious congregations as a whole, CMSM (Conference of Major Superiors of Men) LCWR (Leadership Conference of Women Religious), Congregations are falling into four categories: Growing, Maintaining, Transitioning and Sunsetting.

We have had some remarkable growth. The inclusion of more and more laity, the gatherings on Zoom, the work we do together and the Passionist Earth & Spirit Center. A Year ago, the General Consultor commented that we did more work in preparing for our Provincial Chapter than the Congregation does in preparing for a General Chapter. **We do work well together.** The diversity of groups, committees, organizations and task forces is impressive. And what is also impressive is this growth starts first from the Charism.

Around certain Religious Congregations, both Men and Women, there floats this term “Sunsetting” is getting more prevalent. It is an attitude that what we were founded for

and what we brought to the Church has now reached its completion. We have completed our gift. and we are grateful to God for seeing it through.

The Church, the world and the structures of society have changed so much that our purpose for being simply does not fit in anymore. Sunsetting - some strongly believe once you start sunsetting it cannot turn around.

This, of course, is complicated by the cancerous effects of secularization, which is eating away at all faiths and all religious traditions beginning in developed countries.

Spain, Italy and Europe - they are ahead of us. We are seeing diminishment in all of our cities to different degrees. Parishes are consolidating, Bishops are still trying to scramble to keep parishes open. And at CTU (Catholic Theological Union), I wonder where all the students went. They just do not have the student population we had when I was a student, and I heard the same thing regarding my years 20 years earlier. Many of us have read numerous CARA (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate) studies about the diminishment in the Church. And after reading these studies, I am always left wondering Where do we go from here? Well, what is our goal?

In a conversation with Fr. Joachim Rego, C.P., General Superior of the Congregation, last week, he was speaking of Australia. He said, "We in Australia can only maintain so long. Eventually it will catch up with us." He said, "No one is going to want to join us here in Australia simply to keep our old ministry sites open."

I believe that striving for self-existence because a group or organization does not want to cease to exist does not fit into the Kingdom of God.

A couple of years ago Fr. Joachim Rego has reminded us of this: "The Congregation of the Passion exists to gift the Church of the Charism. And **The CHARISM IS BIGGER THAN THE CONGREGATION.**"

**The Goal and Reason for the existence of our Congregation, through our religious profession, is the Promotion of the Charism: To Keep alive the memory of the Passion, and NOT the survival of the institution.**

We believe the Charism of the Passion is alive and vital and holds more grace and vitality than the structures of our Province and the Congregation of the Passion.

Our future needs to keep this in the foreground. Checking and double checking some of our indwelt ways of doing things. A tiny example.... (Sorry Toby), do we REALLY NEED Clacker boxes anymore? How subtle some of these are. And they have filtered into the fibers of Passionist life. More importantly, we must keep service to the poor and crucified before us!

## **Cristo Rey Chapter**

I was blessed to be at the Chapter of Cristo Rey Province last week. They did not use the term Charism a single time. They use the phrase, “to promote the memory of the Passion”. (Side note: They even got into a discussion of the difference between **preaching, promoting and proclaiming**. Are we proclaiming the memory of the Passion, or are we Promoting it?) {Double side note. I borrowed a Spanish Rule and Constitutions and looked the word up from their text and it said, ANOUNCE} The Annunciation ..

And in the seriousness of the conversation, they asked the question, “Are we getting too comfortable? How long have we been in Mexico City? Querétaro? Cuernavaca? Are we becoming too comfortable there?”

I could not help but think of that for our Province. How long have we been in Detroit? Sierra Madre? Birmingham? Louisville? Have we become too comfortable there?

The culmination of this conversation was the question, “How do we walk new paths?”

How do we walk new paths? And do we want to?

We need to start asking some significant questions. I do not think we can wait three years until the next Chapter to begin having this conversation. We have a lot of work to do in the next three years so we can set the directions at the 2027 Chapter.

In the spirit of Michael Joseph Stengel, C.P., a couple of months back a group of financial people came together to look at the financial picture of Holy Cross Province in 2035. In order to plan that far ahead, essential questions are needed to be asked like “What are we going to look like?” “What about membership and ministries?” It was an honest and frank conversation without any sacred cows and nothing held back. The team simply asked a lot of questions about our future.

Do we, as Holy Cross Province, want to grow, maintain, transition or complete? And realistically, while we all want to see and vote for “growth”, we are not going to get five hundred vocations Vowed and Lay in the next 5 years.

## **An OVERVIEW of Initial Questions**

Some of the questions I think about that keep me up at night include:

1. What will community life look like in 3-5 years? And in 10 years? Do we keep communities open with fewer religious or consolidate? How do we prioritize our current communities? Does the loss of community life cause the loss of the Charism? With regard to community life, what other options do we need to consider?

2. Are we still committed to retreat ministry? If so, do we necessarily need vowed members at a retreat center? What will it take for us to take the bold step and allow a Passionist retreat center to be 100% lay run? What impact will that have for our retreatants? Do we need to begin preparing our lifelong retreatants for this possibility?
3. What is our commitment to CTU? Members of Holy Cross Province were some of the significant founding members of a vision and a dream. It started from some great Passionist minds. And it has gifted many of us with our theological education, biblical studies and a strong academic arm.
4. What about Alabama and our work in Birmingham for the past 86 years?
5. What will be the ratio of vowed to lay in 15-20 years? What is the role of vowed/lay going forward? Is it merely working together in collaboration or is it more co-responsibility?
6. Can we find a new approach to doing vocations? And if vocation work **requires all of us**, are we all committed to doing it? Vocations needs to include both lay and vowed people. What is obvious, I do not think we can use marketing ideas like we have in the past inviting men to be priests. We will have to invite people into a life of dying and rising. This is profoundly different. It is for both men and woman, and it starts with surrendering, new life, paschal mystery, charism and grace.
7. In recruiting lay vocations, what kind of formation can we offer? How are we going to develop/form laity in the spirituality of the Passionists? If Charism is so important, how do we build on our current formation programs? How do we build to the point that many feel confident to teach and proclaim it?
8. Structures beyond Holy Cross Province: Where does the Configuration of Jesus Crucified fit? And what about the Generalate? What is the role of the Generalate? And what might come from the General Chapter in October?
9. Is there room for new ideas? What about new options and new possibilities? We have had unique Ideas and personal commitments spring up from gifted men who have pursued their unique callings in a Passionist way. But corporately?  
→If Charism absolutely comes first, what would a new corporate ministry look like if we build only from Charism? Something worth pondering.

10. We have new Provincial leadership in Cristo Rey Province. How do we build our relationship with Cristo Rey Province? Given how much the demographics of the Church here in the United States are shifting, with greater and greater need for Spanish Speaking ministers, can we strengthen our relationship with the Passionists of Mexico? What might their desire be to cross their northern border?
11. And Speaking of our neighboring provinces? What in the Eastern Province Aligns with our vision? Or, what in Holy Cross Province aligns with the Eastern Province vision? They have put a lot of their future into two baskets: the Thomas Berry Center and an initiative that is beginning in Puerto Rico. Given the median age of their men, much of the rest of their Province is sunseting.
12. Do we need to keep inviting foreign vowed members to keep ministries open? Does this lead to growth? Maintaining? Transformation? Is it realistic to assume they will make a life commitment to Holy Cross Province? I would suspect many of them would want to go “home” someday. And while we have been fortunate in the past with the visa process, there are no guarantees in our future. And I have to ask, how much will vowed men from other provinces embrace the inclusivity and collaboration we, as Holy Cross Province, have worked toward? Will they be able to embrace culture, ecclesiology and partnering with laity?
13. In the CMSM circles, we have toyed with the idea of greater collaboration across Religious circles. Indeed, this was the impetus for CTU over 50 years ago. Instead of each congregation holding their enclosures, how do we begin dialogues that help us cross congregational boundaries and work better together? And that opens up the scariest question, what does that do for our respective Charisms?
14. Questions about leadership. Will the younger religious take any interest in leadership? How do we cultivate leaders, lay and vowed, as well. And how tricky is it working together when we have different ideologies, ecclesiologies, hopes and expectations?
15. Who are some of the people we need to bring in to help implement the answers to our questions?

These are all foundational questions that center on “Who do we want to be, and where are we going?” These questions are important because we all need to be on the same page. Like I said, the above are a few of the questions which keep me up at night.

I do not want to be too Debbie or Dougie Downer here. The practice of appreciative inquiry has pumped a lot of energy into the Province and welcomed new names and

faces. Zoom has certainly helped build a Province-wide community beyond local areas and has even brought people in internationally. We have seen new abundance happening through Charism promotion, family and faith formation evenings, new committees with new initiatives, and last fall, four new international vowed men being brought into Holy Cross Province at our retreat locations. We had an all-time record high number in the Passionist Summer Institute last week. We are finding new trends as we continue to emerge from the pandemic. Some people are asking deeper questions and changing their priorities.

The Passionist Charism has great depth. I have always thought it is like an iceberg. Only a little of it is visible. And if you keep going deeper you will never reach its ultimate depth. What a blessing. Amidst what I call “the superficiality of worldly people”, we have something to offer. Superficiality does not sustain. People get tired of being superficial. We have numerous people doing such good work and finding great reward and meaning. There truly is a rich abundance. And we have rich possibilities.

Using a coin analogy, you have to be realistic. You cannot have both heads **AND** tails. Compared to where we were in 1853, we have an abundance of men and women. Yet, in 2024, the field of the harvest is different than it was over 170 years ago.

The Chapter in Cristo Rey started with Synodal listening. We did a lot of listening. Pope Francis’ efforts for a Synodal Church started by having every parish and religious organization to hold listening sessions. Listen to where the Spirit is leading. That for me is the most important place to start listening, not with personal desires. Additionally, we need to spend time as Passionists listening to the Passion Narratives. We cannot assume that since we have heard them we know them. St. Paul of the Cross never tired of praying and meditating over the Passion Narratives. The origins of Paul’s inspiration need also be the origins of ours. Starting with this kind of listening makes sense. We should not be trying to determine our own destiny. Planning for “survival” is futile. Yet, I will be the first to say surrendering and listening is hard. What makes it easier is if you have something to hold on to. And we have something very stable and secure to hold onto and grasp. It is the ultimate gift we were given. The reality of Christ’s presence in his Passion and Death. As Paul reminds us in Romans 8:31 (NABRE), “If God is for us, who can be against us?”

The world we live in has some very unstable ground. The sands, which so many feet stand, are constantly shifting. I see so many people wanting stability, something they can hold on to. Perhaps that is part of the fear in those who are calling to go back to the times of the yesterday. Faith calls us to hold on to what is most important: the presence of Christ in his Passion and Death.

## **Some of the things we need to start asking**

Can the Province continue without vowed men? Canonically, NO. The structures of the Province and the laws of the Church do not allow that.

### **Options**

Do we want to strive to keep every site open that we currently have? If YES, how long can we maintain this? What options do we have for lay and vowed staffing? And how do we address the need for ordained ministers?

IF NO, then what do we begin to let go of and what priorities will we use to make these decisions?

I am left with an image I received as a child from my dad. When dad would prune the tree, he really pruned the tree. And growth happened because the root system provide nutrition for new growth, rather than trying to sustain all of the branches. The tree looked different, and it was much healthier.

I am also reminded that St. Paul of the Cross at one point felt he was going to lose the entire Congregation. He struggled with seeking God's will amidst his own will. And that to me is part of the first step in our discernment. That prayerful listening and seeking first the Will of God.

I am certainly not looking for any answers today. And I am not offering any solutions. It is just a foretaste of what will be coming up over the next three years. I do not want to wait until the next Chapter to start this conversation.

One of the presenters at the Cristo Rey Chapter last week reminded us that Jesus' mission was about freeing people. Freeing people who were oppressed, blind, helpless and wounded. Remember when the Gospel says that Jesus looked at the crowd and he pitied them. "(H)is heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36, NABRE). Jesus did not come looking for the Cross. He was looking to free people from suffering. He was making a statement about the necessity to free people from their suffering. The Cross is not a place that we just give up. Jesus did not give up. The Cross was a result of being for people. Jesus was for people **so much so that it led to Crucifixion.**

### **Conclusion:**

It is good to be here. It is good to celebrate. It is good to give thanks and praise to God. The spirit of God is with us. And this has been a tremendously spirit filled celebration!

But we cannot stay on the mountain top forever. Fr. Pat Brennan, C.P., reminded us on Monday that we have to go home at the end of the week. Home to continue our work and to Proclaim the memory of the Passion of Christ.



Let us pray:

**2022 Holy Cross Province Provincial Assembly Prayer**

Loving God,

We see so many challenges facing our world today. As we continue to respond to the needs of the world, we strive to discern Your will and follow the movement of the Holy Spirit.

We are grateful for this time of Assembly to pray together as one Passionist Family, deepening our understanding and experience of the charism of St. Paul of the Cross.

We pray in thanksgiving for all the work done in preparation for the Assembly and for the movement of Your Spirit in this work. We ask that You bless our Assembly and the efforts that will flow out of our sharing and reflections.

And we ask You to continue to bless our Passionist Family and all those we serve.

In the name of Christ and Him Crucified.

Amen.