



Congregazione della Passione di Gesù Cristo

IL SUPERIORE GENERALE

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Prot. n. 091/2023/JR

CIRCULAR LETTER

THE PASSIONIST FAMILY

**WALKING TOGETHER AND COLLABORATING WITH SHARED GIFTS
TO KEEP ALIVE THE MEMORY OF THE PASSION OF JESUS CHRIST**



My dear Brothers, Sisters and Friends in the Passionist Family,

I send you greetings, good wishes, and prayers as we commemorate and celebrate today the feast of our Holy Founder: St Paul of the Cross. Happy feast day! With you, I ask his blessings and prayers to inspire the Passionist Family in our call to follow (BE WITH) Jesus - crucified and risen, and in our mission to BE instruments of God's mercy and compassion to the 'crucified' of our world (BE FOR), according to the gifts and vocation (state in life) of each member of this family.



As you are aware, while we members of the Passionist Family are celebrating the feast of St Paul of the Cross today, the first assembly of the two-part **Synod on Synodality** is currently in session here in Rome. This historic event in the life of the Church is significant for our Passionist Family, for we, too, are members of the People of God, and as Pope Francis who has pioneered this reformation says, “*synodality is the path which God expects of the Church of the third millennium because it is a constitutive element of the Church.*” This is authoritative and not optional. As Passionists, we are obliged by our vow to obey this direction from the supreme Pontiff, who is the highest Superior of our Congregation (Const. 24). Synodality questions and challenges the ‘**style**’ of being church as we have known it in our lifetime and invites us to discern together what God expects now, but always as a response to a **contemplative listening** and to the grace of **conversion** of mind and heart. I exhort and encourage the participation and “*walking together*” of our Passionist Family in this evolving synodal journey, especially through **prayer and listening to the Holy Spirit**, as Pope Francis encourages us:

*Walk together. Question together. Take responsibility together for community discernment, which for us is prayer, as the first Apostles did. This is synodality, which we would like to make a daily habit in all its expressions.*¹

We must never forget, however, and need to always keep before our attention that our Congregation and its mission is not separate, or exempt, from the life and mission of the Universal Church. We are not an “alternative church”. On the contrary, our Congregation exists by the legitimate approval of the Church to contribute to its mission of evangelization through the lens of our unique charism: *the memoria passionis*. As is stated in our Constitutions #2:

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.

In Constitutions #6 we are reminded that by our consecration through a special vow to the Passion of Jesus “*our Congregation takes her place in the Church so as to dedicate herself fully to its mission.*”

¹ Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Delegation for the Presentation of the “È Giornalismo” (It’s Journalism) Award.

And finally, in Constitutions #62:

To our own Congregation, the Church has entrusted a special share of her apostolate. She urges us to keep constantly alive in the hearts of the faithful the memory of the Passion, in which the love of our Saviour is so eminently expressed; and she looks to us by our apostolic labours to render more and more fruitful that redemptive love.

With this backdrop, I wish in this circular letter to share with you some thoughts for reflection on the growing relationship and collaboration of the consecrated religious (the vowed/professed Passionist) and lay members of the Passionist Family, and their mutual engagement in the apostolates of the Congregation today which I have been inspired to see in action and hear about in many parts of the world. This joint relationship and collaboration between consecrated religious and laity is an emerging awareness and phenomenon in all religious congregations and is happening on two levels:

- 1) on the level of being drawn or attracted by the **charism** of the congregation - which is recognized as a spiritual gift given to the Church;
- 2) on the level of being involved in the **mission** and **apostolates** of the congregation - which is an integral part and responsibility of all the baptized in the evangelizing mission of the Church.

In his message to the 44th General Chapter of the Congregation in 2000, Pope St John Paul II wrote:

In your Chapter work you have reserved special time for reflection on sharing your Passionist charism with the laity. This is "one of the fruits of the teaching on the Church as communion", which has grown in recent times and is "a new chapter, rich in hope, in the history of relations between consecrated persons and the laity" (Vita consecrata, n. 54). It represents a sign of growing ecclesial vitality which should be welcomed and developed. I fervently hope that those whom the Holy Spirit calls to draw from the same sources of your charismatic spring can find in you brothers and, especially, guides who can not only share your charism with them, but, above all, form them in an authentic Passionist spirituality.

The Holy Cross Province (CRUC) in the western United States has expressed it in this way:

For some time now, we Passionists have recognized that the charism, the spirituality, of St. Paul of the Cross, which is the spirituality of the Passion of Jesus, is not something we "own" or control. It is a gift from God that



is open to all of God's people, whether they are lay, vowed, or ordained. This was explicitly stated in the Passionist General Chapter of 1994: "Our charism is a great gift. Our vocation to keep alive the memory of the Passion of Jesus does not only belong to our Congregation or to our communities; it is open to all those human beings who are moved by the action of the Holy Spirit. We accept the call to live in communion with so many men and women who witness to its relevance and vitality."

The collaboration between lay and consecrated religious of our charismatic family is to be encouraged by our promotion and it will continue to develop with our sense of welcome and committed nurturing. However, it must be grounded in synodality (journeying together) and rooted in the ecclesiology issuing from the Second Vatican Council document 'Lumen Gentium', which teaches that **all the baptized**



are the People of God, are part of the Body of Christ, and belong to the Community of Disciples. The Venezuelan lay theologian Rafael Luciani reflects:

*[Synodality] is a **constitutive** dimension that qualifies **ecclesiality** and defines a **new way of proceeding** that provides a **form** to the Church as **People of God**, an "ecclesial we" where all subjects from the Pope to the Laity, are equals and articulated in a **communion of faithful** with the same responsibility in regards to the identity, vocation and the mission of the Church.*

As such, **all the baptized** have a share in the spiritual gifts and are **co-responsible** in the evangelizing mission of the Church. They are not simply followers of Christ, and not simply disciples, but they are 'apostles' – 'sent' by Christ as missionary disciples. There is need for consecrated religious (and clergy) when dealing with the question of lay participation, to make a paradigm shift from viewing them as mere *collaborators*, to recognize them as **co-responsible** for the Church's being and action. As Sr. Gill Goulding, CJ a professor of systematic theology and spirituality said recently: "It is important that lay life, religious life and the priesthood are all seen as complementary as a reciprocity of service." In this, the laity must also take ownership of their baptismal responsibility and live out their rightful role in the Church for which they do not need any permission.

In a meeting with members of the Italian Bishops' Conference on 25 May 2023, Pope Francis spoke the following strong words which can equally apply to the members of the Passionist Charismatic Family:

Every baptized person is called to actively participate in the life and in the mission of the church, starting from the specifics of one's own vocation, in relationship with others and with the charisms given by the Spirit for the good of all. We need Christian communities in which space is enlarged, where everyone can feel at home, where pastoral structures and means foster not the creation of small groups, but the joy of being and feeling co-responsible.... A church weighed down by structures, bureaucracy and formalism will struggle to walk in history at the pace of the Spirit, meeting men and women of our time.

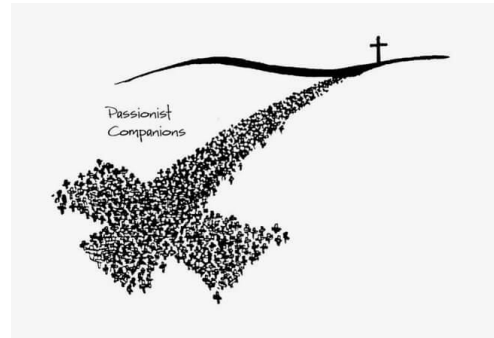
There are a variety of groups, and some lay institutes, associated with the Passionist Charismatic Family which exist in the different parts of the Passionist world. These have emerged because of their personal spiritual 'drawing' to the Passion and Cross of Jesus, their discovery of and attraction to the charism and spirituality of St Paul of the Cross, their association and relationship with the Passionist Congregation, and their involvement with and mission to the "crucified" in their society. These groups also include other religious congregations, especially of the Nuns founded by St Paul of the Cross and various groups of Sisters co-founded or influenced by Passionists. While these groups may have different names, foundations, and forms, they are all committed, according to their particular state in life and contexts, to *keep alive and promote the memory of the Passion of Jesus as the greatest sign of God's love for all.*



Some time ago, I received a letter from a group called the 'Passionist Companions' in Dublin, Ireland. These are lay people who, after participating in a Passionist formation Institute in 2006, felt drawn and attracted by the Passionist charism. They wrote:



*Our inspiration to gather as Companions comes from the General Chapter of 2000 and the statement: ‘The Passionist charism, like life itself, is a gift for which we are eternally grateful; and one that we may not dispose of as though it were our own personal property. Those who wish to stand with us at the foot of the Cross, to contemplate the love of God and then proclaim its saving power, can rightly be called “Passionist”, whether they are men, women, or children.’ When we first heard this in 2006 at the Institute, it resonated deeply with us; it touched something that we felt, but to that point, had been unable to describe in words. That statement continues to resonate today. We always ‘felt’ that we were Passionists. However, our calling has been to live our lives as lay persons, some married, some single, others once married but either now, sadly, widowed or separated. The 2000 statement assured us that it is more than just ‘feeling’ that we are Passionists; we **are** Passionists.*



I was deeply moved by the conviction, identification, and sense of belonging to the Passionist Family which they expressed. The letter goes on to explain the way in which they live and promote the charism through their vocation as lay people and speak of their **right** and **responsibility** as apostles of evangelization, and not just because of the decline or diminishment of consecrated Passionist religious in the Province....

...we believe, without doubt, that there is no place to talk about growing older, less able, dying out, etc. as long as the Companions are about. It is our wish; indeed, it is who we are, that we want to live out the charism of the Passionists and St Paul of the Cross in the lives that we live and if we are faithful to that, then it is only the case that there is a greater dependence on different messengers today when others are not as capable.

For most of our 300 years history as a Congregation, the focus of Passionist life and mission has been very much on those ‘professed’ (vowed) men and women who have embraced the consecrated religious life within the Congregation. While it is true that the prime responsibility for the Institute and its charismatic mission is entrusted by the Church to those who follow the way of the consecrated life, yet we cannot ignore the facts gleaned from our Congregation’s history, and from our own experience, that there have been countless others (lay, religious and ordained) who, through the gift of the Spirit, and/or through their connection with members and works of the

Congregation, have borne charismatic testimony to the Passion of Jesus, with some even feeling and identifying themselves as ‘Passionists’. Surely, these, too, can be considered today as the “companions” which St Paul of the Cross desired to gather? Needed, however, is a sense of belonging to and identification with the Institute which has a duty to arrange for them appropriate **formation and support** which will nurture and deepen in them the Spirit’s call and empower them to be **co-responsible** for mission in accordance with the Institute’s vision. In the spirit of synodality, this must be done in a process of **mutuality** with an openness to discerning together the path being opened for us by the Holy Spirit.

I believe a **new way of being Passionists** is being imagined and emerging with the engagement and collaboration of the laity in the life and mission of the Congregation. Respecting the particular vocation and chosen state in life of every individual, the pathway of **synodality** is the way forward requiring respect, trust, and humility. It is the *mode of being* of a church/congregation which wants to go out in mission. Synodality is essentially missionary. It is a way towards a re-thinking, re-imagining of the Church’s (and of our Congregation’s) role in today’s society. This requires that we let go of our fears, prejudices and narrow-mindedness, and open ourselves to a new understanding and approach of collaborating in witness and mission inspired by the specific vision of our charism: the *memoria passionis*, with the awareness that, as Pope Francis said in his message for our Jubilee: “*For a charism to endure over time, it is necessary to adapt it to new needs, keeping alive the creative power of its beginnings.*”

Let us not be afraid as the Passionist Family (consecrated and lay) to form a synodal pathway along which to **walk together** in a community of faith, of worship, of service, and of mission with a spirit of listening, dialogue, silence, prayer, and discernment. Together, by **listening to the movements of the Spirit within** and **discerning God’s will**, we desire to know how to best share our gifts, so that the memory of the Passion of Jesus may be kept alive as a sign of God’s saving love and enduring compassion in the situation of our contemporary society and world.

This is a time of renewal and prophecy in the Passionist Family. The challenges we are facing at this time of history offers us the opportunity to be **prophetic**: to be enlightened by the Gospel, “*thinking and speaking in the Spirit*” (Pope Francis) and, thus, **renewed**: spiritually, personally, and professionally. It is a time to read in the ‘signs of our history’ God’s desire for us: “*to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with God*” (Micah 6:8).



Together, let us go forward as the Passionist Family “with mind and heart renewed”. This is the grace which follows from the encouragement of St Paul of the Cross to meditate on the Passion of Jesus and contemplate his Cross by which we will come to know *the power and wisdom of God (1Cor. 1:24)*.

Retreat of Sts John and Paul, Rome
Feast of St Paul of the Cross
19th October 2023

Fr. Joachim Rego, C.P.
Superior General



Na Passione Ss^{da} J. Jesu Cristo si sempre, tu noscu Cuori.