

Passionist Spirituality faces attacks on human dignity today

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Khalil Gibran's 'Prophet', when asked to speak about pain, says: "*Pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding. Even as the stone of the fruit must break so that its heart may stand in the sun, so must you know pain*" Awakening to the terrible reality of human suffering breaks open our heart. Then love and action in the service of justice becomes possible.

Appreciating and trying to live our first vow as Passionists to keep alive the ***Memoria Passionis*** should offer a clue as to how that shell may be broken. It should also give us some tools for critical reflection on our contemporary experience

Paul of the Cross began his great work in a world in transition. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648, less than 50 years before his birth, marked the waning of the political influence of papacy and empire, the two major medieval powers. 'Enlightenment' ideas began to make themselves felt. The church would no longer set the agenda; religious communities, dislodged from the center, would find themselves 'at the edge'. In this world Paul found the drawing force of his life in contemplating the Crucified God. From here came his passion for life. The Crucified One led Paul to the ones he saw as the poorest, those who did not know God's love and had no hope. Paul saw the name of Jesus on their foreheads.

We are called to continue the great work in a world still rocked by massive change. At the start of the 3rd millennium, "to see reality in our time is to see the world as crucifixion."¹

Our world is marked by a virulent form of economic globalisation that leads to massive imbalances in the economic order. This affects body, soul and spirit. Access to the basic necessities for living is controlled by a powerful minority. The North, especially the US, and multinationals control and direct the lives of the majority of people in a way that was unknown in the past.

Our minds have been "*colonized*" by the dominant values of **individualism, consumerism and success**. But Martin Buber reminds us that the Cross reminds us that "success is not a name for God"

Living joyfully our relatedness as brothers and sisters is the antidote to individualism. The General Chapter of the Passionists in Brazil 2000 said "*Solidarity is the word chosen to describe a new way of being together as Passionists in mission for the life of the world* [KDI]." New realities call for new responses in faith.

The addiction to consumption can heal when it learns "I am more than what I have" and longs to know that I am loved beyond all doubt. The addiction to success, and to its servants - domination, violence and ruthlessness, can only be healed in the compassion and mercy flowing from the Cross for the victim of such acts.

¹ *The Nonviolent Cross*, Jim Douglass, first published 1968; republished by Wipf & Stock, Eugene, Ore. 2006

Early in its life the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, December 10, 1948 as an emphatic “NO” to the horrors of the 2nd World War. *“Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world...All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood”*. (art 1) But Jesus had already announced this from his Cross!

Do we have anything to say to our world and to our brothers and sisters today and is it likely to be able to be heard?

A world in the throes of enormous change, roiled by violence and new expressions of xenophobia; the demonising of the ‘other’ expressed in the ‘war or terror’, urgently calls us to reflect on the demands of justice at the heart of any spirituality of the Passion if it dares to speak to the questions of today’s women and men.

Two hideous and cancerous growths on the underbelly of uncontrolled globalisation are torture and trafficking. In 1948 the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights stated no-one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. In 1952 Geneva Convention 3 applied this to prisoners of war. In 1987 the UN Convention against torture came into force. All our governments ratified the convention.

But today we are faced with the manipulation of truth and facts. Our governments are walking away from hard-won international law in the name of ‘national sovereignty’ and ‘security’ and keeping their citizens ‘safe’. Human dignity and human rights continue to be sacrificed on the altar on expedience. Torture, so recently universally condemned, is again ‘up for grabs’.

The modern face of slavery is the trafficking of person as labor or sex slaves. This abomination touches every country. Poverty makes women and girls vulnerable to the offer of a better life; greed urges traffickers to sell bodies that are even more valuable than arms or drugs. Every year more than 800,000 people are trafficked across borders either as labour or sex slaves. 80% of slavery victims are children or women. There are millions more trafficked within countries.

Our self-understanding as Passionists has been slowly undergoing a shift over our lifetimes. It finds clear expression in the Constitutions and the General Chapters of the past 30 years. The 2000 General Chapter says: *“Life, born from the cross, was the key for understanding all of the Chapter’s work under the dual aspect of ‘memory’ and ‘prophecy’. As memory, it drew our eyes to the cross from which new life flows, and as prophecy it asked us to look at the tasks of the new millennium with the eyes of Jesus Crucified”*²

Memory and **prophecy** constitute the two eyes of Passionist being – one looks to Jesus of the Cross where love first touched us; the other looks to the present, where His reconciling love becomes a reality here and now.

² 2000 General Chapter Document, p. 10

This binocular approach to our living the Passion requires us to be centered – standing with Jesus in his Passion-moment; and also sent to the edge – to stand with and keep faith with our sisters and brothers as they seek meaning and hope in their crucifixions. To be Passionist today requires that we are passionate about Life in each of its stages and in all of its dimensions - a commitment to care for, to promote and protect life from womb to tomb and in every part of the biosphere.

The foundation of Passionist identity is the realisation that we have flared forth from the burning heart of God. We are the same matter threaded through every atom, molecule and particle that constitutes our universe. Our life-force comes not from duty, obligation or responsibility, but *astonishment and love*.

Paul Danei, in another time and place, was astonished at the overwhelming work of God's love that is Jesus' Passion. As for Jesus, so for Paul; as for Paul, so for each one of us! To be drawn into the heart of our Passionist charism is to be called to live the Passion of the Christ as passion for life in its every dimension and part.

As for Jesus, as for Paul, so for us! Passion for Life calls us to move from the centre to the edge there to find Christ in the suffering earth, in his suffering brothers and sisters, young, old, poor, migrant, displaced, gay, indigenous, misunderstood. Paul, with insight strengthened from gazing on the face of the Crucified, when he turned to look outward he saw the name of Jesus written on the foreheads of the poor.

The outflow of our contemplation of the Passion of Jesus will always call us to stand with the marginalized and the crucified ones who, without fully understanding it, thirst for life. Our contemplation of the Crucified One will always lead us to look to the edge and notice who is left discarded by the way. Sometimes this will involve 'breaking the silence'.

We are called to live today in such a way as to *make present Christ's death as liberation* for the people who are **crucified** today by hunger, injustice and the absence of hope. We are to be 'Memory-makers' that the Crucified/Risen one is hope for the poor and for all of creation.

Passionists face a crucified world

"Jesus will be in agony till the end of time" said French novelist Leon Bloy. As we face the agony of the world today, it suggests to me that this is the Passionist moment. In a world marked more and more by the inequalities of possession, our approach to justice must be more than mere resourcefulness.

We must offer the justice of right relationship. What is needed in this polarized, fearful and 'crusading' world filled with a sense of its own resourcefulness and with a toolkit of solutions, is a 'crucified mind' formed beneath the Cross.³

Such a sense of justice is indeed countercultural – one that embraces our own various experiences of being emptied of ego, of solutions and moved to the sideline of significance.

³ No Handle on the Cross: An Asian Meditation on the Crucified Mind, by Kosuke Koyama 1976

Similar experiences shaped Paul of the Cross, brought him out of the army and away from the Crusades and brought him to be embraced by and then to proclaim the life-giving paradox of the powerlessness of the crucified God.

Catholic Social Teaching on Human Rights and Responsibility

1. Human Rights and Responsibility:

“Every human being is a person; that is, human nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. Indeed, precisely because one is a person one has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from one’s very nature.”

Pacem in Terris, #9

2. Torture:

“The Catholic Church has constantly spoken out in favor of unconditional respect for life and has unequivocally condemned ‘all violations of the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture, undue psychological pressures and all offences against human dignity’”

Gaudium et spes, #27

3. Slavery/Human Trafficking:

“Trafficking in persons—in which men, women, and children from all over the globe are transported to other countries for the purposes of forced prostitution or labor— inherently rejects the dignity of the human person and exploits conditions of global poverty.”

Strangers No Longer:
Together on a Journey of Hope, #90