



## CIRCULAR LETTER TO THE RELIGIOUS OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE PASSION THE CALL TO REPENTANCE

*"Tear your hearts..." (Joel 2:13)*

### THE INVITATION



**M**y dear brothers,

taking as a point of departure the beginning of this Lenten season, I feel moved to write this Circular Letter by which I invite you to join with me in this privileged and favourable time of **interior pilgrimage** towards God - **the fount of mercy** - who will accompany and sustain us. As is the goal of this time of Lent, I choose to share some reflections on the central message of Jesus' **call to repentance**, but from the perspective, as must always be done, of keeping as our focus the tender mercy of our Loving God which for us, Passionists, is seen so powerfully in the Passion of Jesus.

With the marking of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Canonization of our Holy Founder in June this year, and as we begin to make remote preparations for the celebration of the General Chapter next year, I believe this is a proper time for us to do some serious personal stock-taking in faith, not with the view of deciding on any grand plans, but rather to bring our personal lives, our vocation as Passionist religious, and our Congregation's mission and ministries under the light of God's Word, with the openness of being challenged and disturbed by the Spirit so that we come more and more under the influence of Christ. We all know how easily (even unconsciously) we can get caught-up and dragged under the influence of the contrary "lights" of our world. It is thus necessary for the health and authenticity of our vocation to regularly have a check-up from a **contemplative stance** and with the assurance of God's grace to make the necessary directional changes.

I wish to recall what I expressed in my report to the XV General Synod in 2015:

*My vision is an encouragement and challenge to something basic.*

*I feel that we all need to hear again and again the call of Jesus to **conversion**: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the gospel." (Mk. 1:15) This is a great challenge: to fight against our self-centred human tendencies and turn-around our minds, hearts and attitudes to align itself with the dream and purpose of God for all of creation.*

Of course, this emphasis on 'conversion' (even though somewhat lost) is not something new for us. It has especially been a focus since the start of the Congregation's restructuring programme over a decade ago. While the key-word has been "Solidarity", it was expressed time and again that no genuine solidarity can be lived without personal and communal conversion.

### **METANOIA - "Tear your hearts..."**

Conversion or repentance (*metanoia*) happens when I **surrender** my whole self to Christ in trust – not knowing clearly where this will all lead, but being prepared to take the journey in faith. Conversion (*metanoia*) is a **process** – a shift or movement from somewhere/something to somewhere/something else. It is a radical change, a **renewal** of outlook; a complete turn-around from seeing, thinking and acting in one way to a completely new way – the way Christ. This is not an easy, but painful process. As the prophet Joel in announcing God's invitation to the people: "Come back to me with all your heart" (Joel 2:12) challenges them to: "**Tear your hearts...**" (Joel 2:13) Another translation is: "**Let your hearts be broken...**"

The pain involved in the process of conversion is expressed by Evelyn Underhill thus: "*Conversion is a violent shattering and rearranging of the self.*" *Metanoia* is more than a simple change of mind with a cosmetic temporary surface alteration which may relate to specific behaviours that are modified, curbed or adapted. Rather, *metanoia* implies a reworking, a refashioning, a recasting of things at the much deeper level of the soul.

One way to understand the process and meaning of conversion (*metanoia*) is to enter into the story and experience of Saul in the **Acts of the Apostles 9:1-20**.

Saul, as we know, was a very powerful figure. He was ruthless. He committed himself to persecute and destroy the church of Christ. He went to great lengths to hound, arrest, torture and kill the followers of Jesus. He was quite happy living his life in this way; he was self-sufficient and in total control...that is, until Christ takes the initiative to intervene in his life and his plans.

And then, what happens when Saul **encounters** the Lord? He is literally “knocked off his high horse”! This powerful man is now rendered powerless in the presence of the Lord Jesus who challenges Saul to reflect and take a closer look at his life: “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*” Saul, who is lying on the ground, blinded, having been ‘disarmed’ by the Lord, can do nothing else but look up and **surrender** totally to the Lord: “*Who are you, Lord? What must I do?*” Saul is no more in control; he is humbled and has given over (surrendered) control to Christ. This is the moment of conversion! As Emilie Griffin says:

*Surrender is the real turning point of conversion. It is the moment...we know that we belong to the Lord. Our allegiance is given; it is committed; we cannot turn back.*

Saul had made the shift from somewhere/something to somewhere/something else. He made the movement from being a soldier who persecuted the Christians to becoming the great apostle to the pagans who proclaimed: “*Jesus is the Son of God.*”

Note that it was not the initiative nor the intention of Saul to make this profound change in his life. Rather, it was **the Lord Jesus** who called, challenged, and moved Saul to conversion “*because this man is my chosen instrument to bring my name before pagans and pagan kings and before the people of Israel...*”

John Powell wrote:

*...metanoia is a faith experience and consequently the work of grace. Only God can make a person a believer, and only by believing in Jesus can we take on this vision. Faith is not and never has been a matter of intelligence or logical ability...In a sense faith is rather for the open-minded and the brave-hearted. Faith is for those gamblers who are willing to wager everything on Jesus.*

Conversion is never once and for all, but continuing series of events – a process. So, conversion is an ongoing call because the starting point of *metanoia* is sin. We are all sinners and therefore we are called and challenged to a change of mind, a change of outlook, a new vision every day and every moment of our lives. This is also the starting point of the Gospel and the proclamation of Jesus who began his public ministry with these words: “*The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent , and believe the Good News.*” (Mark 1:15)

As we embark on our pilgrimage this Lent, we will encounter Jesus in many different ways, and if we respond positively to this meeting, we will not be able to avoid being changed or converted in some way. This is the essence of our Christian calling. Every conversion experience is a journey from death to life – a participation in Jesus' Passover. It is an experience of new power and renewed life. Emilie Griffin writes:

*Conversion is the direct experience of the saving power of God. It is a matter of becoming open to God's overflowing and powerful love. To be filled with that love is to change, to be changed, to act lovingly towards others...Conversion is the turning over of one's life and energies to God.*

The goal of all *metanoia* is some manifestation of **God's love**: a sense of being drawn toward God, of being seized, of being embraced. It is **love** that inspires true conversion – not fear! Conversion is "*the rediscovery of God's love.*" (Henri Nouwen)

However, before any hope of changing/renewing our hearts, *metanoia* requires of us: **openness and freedom.**

- We need open eyes to identify the blocks that keep us from being all that we can be; from becoming, from growing to our full potential.
- We need open ears to allow God's Word to shake us out of our lethargy and unresponsiveness.
- We need open and trusting hearts to surrender ourselves to a goal, a future as yet unknown to us, but gradually unfolding before us in God's own ways.

I wish to share with you the following quotation by Fr Pedro Arrupe SJ which I found speaks simply and directly to me:

*Conversion is getting rid of something so that something else can take its place. It is getting rid of everything that prevents us from being filled with the Holy Spirit. Conversion, then, is a change; a change that takes place deep inside us, a radical change. Let us make no mistake about it, there is nothing superficial about conversion. It is not a giving away of something that we can well afford to lose. It goes much deeper than that.*

*Conversion is a putting away of something that we **are**: our old self, with its all too human, all too worldly, prejudices, convictions, attitudes, values, ways of thinking and acting, habits which have become so much a part of us that it is agony even to think of parting with them, and yet which are precisely what prevents us from rightly interpreting the signs of the times, from seeing life steadily and seeing it whole.*

## CONCLUSION

Dear brothers, my sincere intention and deep hope in inviting you during this Lenten period to participate in this **interior pilgrimage** to the '**fount of mercy**', is to initiate a process of **Congregational renewal** which, I believe, can only be realised by the **personal renewal** of each member. This is not about creating new structures with which we have been engaged for some time now...and continue to do so. Ultimately, however, nothing will act for the renewal of our Congregation and it's mission until there is **change and renewal of hearts**, which can only come about by the surrender of my life in trust to our merciful and loving God, and by responding with courage and hope to Jesus' call to repentance: *"Repent , and believe the Good News."* (Mark 1:15)

As we begin this period of Lent, let us look forward to experiencing again the wonderful and life-giving Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. At Easter, may we know once more the death of Jesus in our bodies, so that we might also know in our bodies the power of his Resurrection.

This Lenten pilgrimage is a journey of following Christ, step by step, to the glory of Calvary. It is a journey:

- from sinfulness to forgiveness
- from loneliness to love
- from joy to gratitude
- from pain to compassion
- from grief to understanding
- from fear to faith
- from defeat to triumph

until whether looking backwards or forwards, we will see our victory of renewal in body, mind and spirit was begun with this first step.

So, taking courage from Christ, let our pilgrimage begin!

SS. Giovanni e Paolo, Roma  
Lent 2017

**Fr Joachim Rego CP**  
*Superior General*



**Message of Pope Benedict XVI on the occasion of the 46<sup>th</sup> General Chapter**

*The Passion of Jesus is an inexhaustible mystery  
in which is found the basis for the liberation of humankind from the many evils to  
which it is subject...*

*Your Chapter, prepared with such diligence, is taking place at the vigil of the Year of  
Faith,*

*a propitious time for an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the one Savior  
of the world.*

*Rediscover here the wellsprings of your vocation and the fruitfulness of your apostolic  
works,*

*so that you may incarnate your charism in the contemporary socio-cultural context,  
and thus be attentive to the signs of the times*

*as you go forward to engage new missionary challenges with pastoral wisdom and  
courage.*