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Studies in Passionist History and Spirituality

ST. PAUL OF THE CROSS FOUNDER OF THE PASSIONISTS 1694-1775

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ST. PAUL OF THE CROSS, FOUNDER OF THE PASSIONISTS, 1694-1775

1. BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Paul Danei, who was later known as Paul of the Cross, was born on January 3rd, 1694. His birthplace was the town of Ovada, near Alessandria, approximately 590 kilometers or 369 miles north of Rome, Italy. He was the eldest of the six children who were to survive out of a family of fifteen. In comparison to the general stature of the people of the time, Paul was tall and had a strong constitution. In spite of attacks of malaria, rheumatism, sciatica, frequent heart palpitations and other illnesses, most of which were the result of the severe penances of his Congregation, he lived to almost 82 years of age. He died in Rome on October 18th, 1775.

Of a temperament which his contemporaries described as “intense and ardent” or “enthusiastic, very sensitive,” Paul reacted profoundly to every experience, pleasant or painful, and this exposed him to much psychological suffering. His letters testify to this: joy and fear, enthusiasm and depression alternate in him, even though they are illuminated by a lively faith and assumed with a view to conforming himself to the will of God. To this side of his nature was added a spiritual desolation that lasted throughout many years and caused him to say: “Some days – in fact, almost every day – I don’t know what to do to help myself. Nevertheless, with great effort, I make it my business to bring help to others, without ever fully succeeding” (*Processes*, I, p.182). But the written evidence all points to Paul’s unfailing affability, his lovable and respectful-like manner in putting into effect decisions that had been taken, encouraging his religious to do likewise (I, p.142).

Paul’s formation was obviously marked by the influence of his family background. His father Luca (+1727) and his mother, Anna Maria Massari (+1746), gave him an example of deep faith in God and genuine devotion to Jesus Crucified in which they themselves found the courage to give themselves totally to their children. As the eldest son Paul spent his childhood and youth close to home, as his mother gave birth to many children, nine of whom died. Thus he grew accustomed to the meaning of life and death. He also helped his father in the family business, which was their sole support. In the course of this business, Paul made several journeys which brought him into contact with people of very diverse mentalities. All of this gave him a strong faith and a deep human realism, which was to help him in his role as founder and spiritual guide. It also developed in him, as his letters testify, an image of woman as a being in whom the qualities of gentleness and heroic devotion in the service of an ideal reign supreme.

He was unable to follow a regular course of study. He taught himself, thanks to his own industry. He was endowed with an excellent memory, and was able to acquire a good grounding in general culture and theology. later, the lights of the Holy Spirit, which he received through his mystical experiences and prayer, established him as a theologian and a competent spiritual master, with safe and prudent judgement. His knowledge of men and of their real needs and his feeling for the Gospel, led him in questions of morality, to a balanced position, based on mercy without laxity, on confidence in God and in the merits of the Passion of Our Lord, leading to the practice of the virtues and frequent reception of the Holy Eucharist. In this way, he helped to re-awaken among Christians the sense of God’s goodness, which had been weakened by the influence of Jansenism.

It seems that in July 1713, while listening to a sermon preached by his parish priest, he received such an interior light on the greatness and goodness of God that his life appeared to him

transformed. He realized that not only was he imperfect, but a sinner. He made a general confession of his sins, and formed the resolution “to consecrate himself to a holy and perfect life” (*Let. IV*, p.217-221; *Processes 1* p.32). The most direct result of this “conversion” – the term he uses – was the discovery that God is “his God,” “his Beloved,” “Immensity,” “Infinite Goodness,” and to cling to Him henceforth, not only by an intellectual act, however enlightened by faith, but by uniting himself vitally to the paschal mystery of Christ, who is from now on “Jesus, our real Good,” or even “Jesus, the Spouse.” Such was the beginning of a profound interior transformation and of his mystical life. It prepared him to welcome the particular vocation to which God was calling him.

In this spiritual climate, he aspired to martyrdom in defense of the faith. So he responded to the appeal launched by Pope Clement XI in 1715, for Christians to enroll in a crusade to help Venice defend Western Christianity against the Turks. He arrived in Crema to enlist. However, on February 20th 1716, the day after Ash Wednesday, he went into a church to visit the Blessed Sacrament, which was exposed for the “Forty Hours” Adoration. It was made clear to him that his vocation was not to defend the faith by force of arms.

He returned to his family and continued to help his father, while his spiritual life developed under the influence of interior lights on the mysteries of the faith. In 1717, he received the first of these – it concerned his own vocation – inwardly, he felt an urge to retire to solitude to lead “a penitential life in great poverty.” In 1718 he received another, “to assemble companions and to live with them with a view to promoting in souls a holy fear of God.” During the summer of 1720, the decisive light came; interiorly, he saw himself wearing a black habit on which there was a heart bearing the name of Jesus and the sign of His Passion, with a cross above the heart. He realized that he was to wear this habit of mourning in memory of the Passion of Our Lord, and to promote “the grateful memory of it” in the souls of the Faithful.

In this spiritual light, he had a new understanding of the need for solitude, poverty and penance which he had already felt, and saw that they were related to the life in community of his future companions. “After these visions of the holy habit...God,” he wrote, “gave me a growing impulse and desire to assemble companions, and, with the authorization of our Holy Mother the Church, to found a Congregation called: The Poor of Jesus. And He left me with a mental picture of the form of the Holy Rule which the Poor of Jesus and myself should observe” (*Let. IV*, p.219-220).

This process of Paul’s enlightenment about his personal vocation is mystical, as he himself gives us to understand: “I saw no physical form...no, I saw things in God, in other words, the soul knows that this comes from God, because He makes it understand through the interior movements of the heart, through the light which He infuses into the soul”(*Let. IV*, p.219). But this interior evidence makes him feel keenly his membership in the Church, and urges him to leave things to its approval: “I submit entirely to the advice of my superiors...with the permission of Holy Mother Church, (I should like) to found a Congregation...But in everything, I leave it to the judgement of my superiors” (*Let. IV*, p.219, 220, 221).

Discernment of God’s will, which he had begun with the help of his spiritual director, was accomplished with his bishop, Francesco Arbario Di Gattinara, who died in 1743. After hearing his general confession and conversing with him for a long time, the bishop was sufficiently convinced of the credibility of what Paul told him, and consented to clothe him in a black

penitential habit on Friday, November 22nd, 1720. He then gave him instructions to make a retreat of forty days, taking note each day of what happened in his soul. At the same time, he was to write the rule of his proposed Congregation. This injunction obtained for us an exceptional document of mystical experience in the Italy of the 18th century.

2. THE FOUNDER

a. The Passionists

Gattinara, after reading the notebook and the rule, consulted different people, and was convinced of the spiritual authenticity of their contents. He was, however, undecided on how to put these divine inspirations into effect. With his permission, Paul went to Rome in September 1721, hoping to obtain an audience with the Pope, and authorization to begin recruiting companions. Without the necessary recommendations, however, he came away empty handed. He went to the basilica of Saint Mary Major, where he renewed his promise to carry out the charism he had received and made a vow to promote the memory of and devotion to the Passion of Our Lord, and to invite others to join him to this end (*Processes* 1, p.160; Strambi, *Life* p.147).

Paul was sure of the divine origin of his inspiration. He wrote to his bishop; “I trust in my Crucified Lord, and am more than certain that everything will work out. God has given me the inspiration and a very definite sign that He wants it. What reason is there to fear? (*Let.* 1, p.22). But he could not see clearly where or how to begin. With Gattinara’s approval he went to Monte Argentario in the diocese of Pitigliano, where the bishop authorized him to accept his brother, John Baptist, to work with him. At the request of the respective Ordinaries, he also went to Gaeta and Troia. In May 1725, while he was in Rome for the jubilee indulgence, Paul met the future Cardinal Crescenzi (+1743), who proved a friend and protector. He introduced Paul to Cardinal Pier Marcellino Corradini (+1743). The latter obtained a brief audience with Benedict XIII, who encouraged Paul verbally to form a group of companions and put into effect the inspiration he had received from God. From the juridical point of view, this verbal permission was worthless. But Paul and the first group of Passionists saw in it a confirmation of his inspiration. After various vain attempts in Gaeta and Itri, Paul traveled to Rome, and offered his services at the hospital of San Gallicano, founded by Cardinal Corradini. It was while he was there that he was ordained a priest.

He experienced a growing spiritual uneasiness, however, realizing with increasing clarity that God’s plan for him did not lie that way. In February 1728, he left the hospital and went back to Monte Argentario, and it was there, in the hermitage of San Antonio, that the first Passionist community came into being. On May 15th, 1741, Benedict XIV approved for the first time the rule of the new institute, called “The Congregation of the Poor Discalced Clerics under the title of the Holy Cross and Passion of Jesus Christ.” On June 11th of the same year, Paul and his first six companions made their profession in public of the three vows of religion, adding a fourth which distinguished the charism or ultimate objective of the Congregation, namely, to promote the grateful memory and cult of the Passion of Our Lord among the faithful by meditating on this mystery of salvation with them, and by teaching them to meditate on it. Paul’s efforts to obtain solemn vows were unsuccessful. He wanted solemn vows, seeing in them security for the Congregation’s future, a guarantee for attracting vocations, and for being able to ordain clerics on the title of the Common Table. In 1769 Clement XIV approved the institute as a Congregation with simple vows, granting it a share in all the privileges of the mendicant orders and the regular

congregations already approved. In this way he assured the moral and juridical stability of the Congregation and the possibility of having its clerics ordained without any difficulty. At the time of Paul's death the Congregation had a firm place in the Church, with twelve retreats and 176 religious.

b. The Passionist Contemplative Nuns

From 1734 Paul tried to found a convent of nuns pursuing the same objective. "We want to establish a convent of magnanimous and saintly souls, dead to all created things, who will strive to imitate Jesus Suffering and the Sorrowful Virgin by the practice of the holy virtues, mortification and penance" (*Let.* II, p.304). Clement XIV helped him overcome the obstacle posed by the need for solemn vows which were necessary at the time for the foundation of a convent of contemplative nuns. The first foundation was in Corneto (today's Tarquinia) in 1771. The Passionist nuns also take the special vow proper to the Passionists, of fostering and promoting the memory of the Sufferings of Our Lord. They devote themselves to the contemplation of this mystery by spending three hours or so a day in prayer, in addition to the day and night office, in an atmosphere of silence carefully observed. By their prayers they accompany the Passionists on their missions, praying "night and day for the conversion of souls, especially those who have strayed furthest from God" (*Let.* I, p.490; Rules, ch. 10).

Their spirituality, like that of the Passionist religious, is centered on the mystery of Crucified Love, the basis of special demands of poverty, penance and community life in fraternal union. They observe the enclosure proper to nuns with solemn vows only by virtue of the rule and by vow. Actually, Paul allowed them to receive, within clearly specified limits, women who wished to make retreats. It was an opportunity to pass on to others the fruits of their contemplation, and to teach others how to meditate on the Passion of Our Lord. The first Mother Superior was Maria Crocifissa Costantini, whom Paul directed for nearly forty years. The cause for her beatification has been introduced.

3. THE MISSIONER

Paul was one of the outstanding missionaries in Italy in the 18th century. His work was done mostly in central Italy. He and his religious gave preference to those who were most neglected in matters of religion, the people who lived in the marshy coastal regions, on the small islands, or in the countryside.

His method was very much like that of St. Leonard of Port-Maurice (+1751, *DS*, t. 9, col. 646-649), but rather more simple. In fact, after a few experiments he omitted penitential processions altogether, keeping only to the discipline and a few dramatic gestures for certain meditations. He preferred meditation and reflection which, in his opinion, encouraged conversion and solid resolutions. His personal contribution was the daily public meditation on the Passion of Our Lord, and his daily instruction on meditation which would help people to put aside fear of the judgement of God and to have confidence in His forgiveness through the merits of Christ Crucified. Wherever he went he wanted to establish the practice of meditation on Our Lord's Passion, either individually or in groups. He was not satisfied in giving a particularly kind welcome to sinners, especially public sinners. He would often tell them, in order to encourage them, that he was taking on himself the responsibility of the penance incumbent on them. This solidarity with them explains in some measure the desolation he had to suffer over a period of many years.

4. THE SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR

In addition to the considerable work of direction carried out during missions and retreats, and in conversations with whoever came to see him at the monastery, Paul also gave spiritual direction by correspondence to lay people consecrated to God in the world, to married people, priests, nuns, and religious of his own Congregation. He confessed himself astonished that God in His mercy should have chosen him “to direct certain souls endowed with wonderful gifts and practicing a very high form of prayer.” He also stated: “The experience I have had of their heroic virtue, and of their holy and sincere progress in faith, makes me think that these people are not deluded” (*Let.* II, p.276). He realized that saintly direction “pre-supposed sanctity, learning, experience, prudence and a clear call from God” (*Let.* I, p.149). Consequently, he only accepted the office of direction in obedience to the clearly revealed will of God. (cf. *Let.* I, p.178). Once the responsibility was accepted, God made use of him to form a profound union with the person he was directing, in a spirit of genuine detachment. For him, it was a guarantee “that this spiritual union was founded in Jesus Christ (*Let.* I p.178).

I love all souls, especially those whom God has confided to me for spiritual direction. My soul feels totally united by a spiritual bond, more to one, less to another, following the path of love more or less indicated by God in their regard. I mean, if a soul has a closer relationship of love and union with God than another, then certainly – and God has given me to understand it in this way – since that soul is loved more by the Sovereign Good, the sacred bond of charity unites me more closely to it. This in no way prevents me from being united to others in charity, rather more to one than to another, as my Sovereign Good wills it” (*Let.* I, p.149-150).

This spiritual adaptation to different persons allowed him to give the advice suitable for each individual according to God’s plan. “The direction I am giving you in the name of the Lord corresponds to your way of life. It would be a mistake to apply it to someone who is not following the same path. Different stomachs require different food” (to Sister C. G. Gandolfi, *Let.* II, p.472; cf. advice to T Fossi, *Let.* I, p.581). He prays for the people he is directing, and many of his letters were written while he was absorbed in contemplation. Sometimes he mentions this to his correspondent, so that he or she may have greater confidence in the help God wishes to give through Paul’s direction. “Read this letter from time to time,” he writes, “I wrote it after saying Mass; I see that God enlightened me; regard it as a treasure coming from him, because in myself I have nothing to give” (*Let.* I, p.462; cf. p.287; III p.464).

The fundamental points of his direction were, first, to acquire, with the help of grace, humility, which ought to be “knowledge through experience of one’s own nothingness” (*Let.* II, p.298), in order to open oneself to everything that is God, to conform oneself to the Word Incarnate who made Himself nothing, and to merit in this way to be with Him in the bosom of the Father. Besides humility, one must desire and accept crucifixion with our Lord, abandoning oneself to God’s Will in the same love of Jesus. All that comes about by passing through the door which is Jesus; by being docile to the real master of prayer and the spiritual life, who is the Holy Spirit, to whom Paul keeps referring with remarkable emphasis and trust. Transforming union, in the measure which God wills it, is the objective to which his direction tends: “Live in God, breathe in God, and burn with His love” (*Let.* I, p.134).

5. THE SPIRITUAL WRITINGS

a. The “Diary” (daily record), which he wrote during his 40 days retreat at the end of 1720, allows us to know something of the spiritual level attained by Paul when he was 27. It also reveals the principles which were to serve as a support to his spirituality and his teaching, namely, to understand that the norm of the Christian life is participation in the life of Jesus; to perceive God as “Immensity,” in whom one must immerse oneself while sharing in the Passion of Christ; the humanity of the Word Incarnate is the indispensable medium for entering into communion with the Trinity; suffering is God’s gift, enabling one to share more fully in the lot of Christ on the cross and in glory.

The “Diary” was known to Paul’s first biographer, but unknown to those of the 19th century until the time of Louis-Therese Laffargue, who speaks of it at length (*Histoire de S. Paul de la Croix*). Published for the first time in 1867, along with certain selected letters, it went unnoticed. In 1924 it was included in the first volume of the *Letters*. In 1925 J. de Guibert published a French translation (*RAM*, t.6, p.26-48) in the hope that it would take its place “among the classic texts of Catholic mystical theology” (p.27). In fact, the “Diary”, like the *Letters*, attracted little attention till the 1950’s. For the written tradition and the authentic text see: *S. Paolo della Croce: Diario Spirituale*, ed. Zoffoli, Rome 1964.

b. The Letters - Many of those that have been preserved deal with questions of the foundation and government of the Congregation. More than half, however, refer to spiritual direction. The style is simple, sober and, in general, flowing; although written hastily, vivacity and humor are sometimes noticeable. There are 155 quotations from Scripture, quoted to confirm or explain his teaching, and references to the Fathers and to general culture. At the moment there are 2,060 letters, published in five volumes. We know that Paul wrote thousands. It is reasonable to suppose that some must be in the possession of private individuals. Those we have are sufficient to show his teaching and his method of direction.

c. Morte Mistica - This is a little work in which Paul suggests living the vows as a mystical participation in the Passion and Death of Our Lord, in order to be born again to a new deified life, and thus share in the glory of Christ.

Paul sent this little work to a Carmelite nun in Vetralla, Angela M. Maddalena Cencelli, for her profession on November 22, 1761. In 1765 he also sent the manuscript to the Passionist Master of Novices, with the directive: “In *Morte Mistica* you will find a program of very high perfection and sanctity. It would not be proper therefore to give it to the novices before being sure that they have made noticeable progress in prayer and in the virtues. If they receive it as beginners, the fear is that they will give up, and think the way of virtue too difficult” (*Let.* III, p.442). This written work disappeared from circulation shortly after Paul’s death because of some doubt prevalent at the time about mysticism outside the Congregation, and even among some of its members, even though they had known Paul. It was only in 1976, following the chance discovery of a manuscript copy, that it was published in the fifth volume of the *Letters*.

d. The Passion of Jesus Christ in forty brief meditations, recommended by Rev. Fr. Paul of the Cross, is a booklet printed in Camerino after a mission Paul gave there in 1750. As the word “raccomandate” indicates, it is not certain that the work was written by Paul himself, although the method suggested and the ideas developed are found in his letters and sermons. The booklet was intended for the ordinary faithful.

6. THE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

a. *The Passion of Christ, a Work of Love.*

During his forty days retreat he understood the sufferings of Our Lord as a Guarantee, a revelation of the love of God, showing him his own sufferings as the sufferings of Christ, and those of Christ as his own. He wrote: “Your sufferings, God of love, are a guarantee of your love (27th Nov), and again, “Your crosses are my heart’s joy” (26th Nov). God gave him “a generous amount of infused understanding” to grasp the reasons for the Passion, the infinite love of God; and man’s sin, which poses an obstacle to that love. All of which produced “such a burning desire to be united to Him that it was his aim to suffer now the torments He had endured, and to be on the cross with Him” (6th Dec). This knowledge of the love and suffering of the Word Incarnate which he had actually experienced aroused in him admiration, love and suffering for the torments Jesus had endured, and of which, by faith, he sees himself a witness.

This is the beginning of that loving, sorrowful contemplation which is characteristic of his experience and teaching; that contemplation where love is the beginning and the end, always being referred to the uncreated love of the Trinity, but which comes to us by means of the life of suffering endured by the Incarnate Word. In the “Diary” he wrote for the benefit of the bishop: “When I relate these sufferings to my beloved Jesus, I sometimes have to stop after one or two examples, because my soul is incapable of continuing, feeling completely powerless; it stops, fainting, with a feeling of great sweetness, mixed with tears; the suffering of her spouse has been infused into her. Or, to make me understand more clearly, the soul has been plunged into the heart and sufferings of Jesus, her sweet Spouse. Sometimes the soul has understanding of everything, and remains thus in God, having this loving and sorrowful vision” (8th Dec).

Paul’s understanding, which is the radiating source of his experience and teaching, is revealed in the statement: “to have the sufferings of Jesus the Spouse infused in one’s soul.” The term “Spouse” has its mystical sense here. The soul regards and apprehends Jesus as its “Spouse”; it feels itself full of love, and receives the knowledge and experience of the sufferings of Jesus as gifts. It experiences them as its own, enduring, and rejoicing over them at the same time, because for the soul they are the guarantee of the love of Jesus, and of the loving response that she herself makes to Him. On the last day of this retreat, Paul had a profound experience of the love of God manifested in the Passion of Jesus, and of the necessity of passing through the humanity of the Incarnate Word in order to reach the uncreated love of the Trinity. He writes: “I was aware of the soul united by bonds of love to the Sacred Humanity, and, at one and the same time, completely powerless and elevated to a great and conscious knowledge of the Divinity. In fact, since Jesus is both God and Man, the soul cannot be united in holy and completely unresisting love to the Sacred Humanity without being at the same time elevated to a great and conscious knowledge of Divinity” (1st January). We are dealing here with a supernatural work, as the frequently, recurring expressions “infused knowledge” and “infused suffering” indicate.

And so, on the 28th December, while he was meditating on the sufferings of Jesus and Mary during the flight into Egypt he notes: “...in my poor soul, suffering and love were intermingled, with an abundance of tears and sweetness; and the soul had an infused understanding of it all in a very high degree. Sometimes it understood suddenly, as though it was a question of a single mystery, without bodily or imaginary forms; God simply infuses everything with His infinite charity and mercy. When the soul has a very high form of understanding, it either takes delight or suffers, according to the mystery being considered. Most frequently, holy joy is present. This experience aroused in him the desire, which was to become reality, to have imprinted on his

heart the sufferings of Our Savior, to feel deep compassion for them and to participate in them in reality. He asked the Blessed Virgin to pray “that the sorrows and sufferings of my Lord should remain imprinted on my heart; something I desire so much” (*Let. I*, p.134). On another occasion, he asks prayers “to have to suffer real pain for having offended God, and to have His Sacred Passion imprinted on my heart” (*Let. I*, p.465; *Processes II*, p.427,630, where the gift of the impression of Christ’s Passion on Paul’s heart is mentioned).

b. *Desolation, Total Suffering, (“Nudo Patire”) and Abandonment to the Will of God.*

As we have already pointed out, Paul’s conversion was followed by a period of intense illumination on the mysteries of the faith to the point where they almost became obvious to him. He used to say that he was “very happy to believe in the obscurity which was, however, brighter than the sun” (*Let. I*, p.199). Hence his constant exhortations “to walk in faith” and “the just man lives by faith.” After these spiritual illuminations there was a period of severe spiritual trials which prepared him for the gift of transforming union which he received before 1727. It is impossible to give the exact date (cf. E. Zoffoli, *Storia Critica*, t.2, p.1380-1392). For a short time he enjoyed this union. However, God soon permitted him to find himself once more in desolation for nearly forty years, which has earned for him the title of “Prince of those in great sorrow” (H Martin, art. “Desolation,” *DS*, t.3, col. 635).

This desolation has been described as repugnance to and fear of physical suffering, but more especially moral suffering, which almost overwhelmed him. He speaks of “very great interior abandonment,” a “sort of pain of damnation, rejected by God – that’s the impression I had. I felt as if I were His greatest enemy. I had violent temptations against the theological virtues, temptations to impatience, to blasphemy, to despair, and even frightful spiritual trials, impossible to describe” (*Let. II*, p.753; cf. I. p.180). Those who have studied this long period of desolation after Paul had received the transforming union agree that we are dealing here with purifying trials, each one of them destined to be “transformed in God by love” (*Let. I*, p.180). This transformation is indeed realized in “the pure love of God,” and can only be attained by “unrelieved suffering, without any consolation, supernatural or natural,” like Christ on the cross (*Let. I*, p.180). In the desolation endured by Paul, some authors, following R. Garrigou Lagrange, see his suffering as a work of redemption or reparation; others, a simply being in conformity to, or participating in, the sufferings of Our Lord. Garrigou-Lagrange (“Nuit réparatrice en S. Paul de la Croix,” in *Estudes Carmélitaines*, Oct 1938, p.287-293) surely insists too much on the idea of reparation, not only as regards Paul himself, but his Congregation, which he presents as being founded for this purpose. Many Passionists reject this view (cf. S. Breton, *La mystique de la Passion*, p.188-189); others accept it (cf. Zoffoli, op. cit. t.2 p.1269-1273).

It is certain that this desolation must be understood as a participation in the Passion of Christ because of a personal charism. But another important aspect of the redemption must be seen in it too; namely, the “apostolic” stamp of the vocation of the founder and the Congregation. As we have mentioned, Paul often took upon himself the penance which those confessing their sins should have performed. He worked for the conversion of those people furthest away from God, and directed souls called to great sanctity. All this demanded on his part a spiritual preparation consisting of contemplation and redemptive suffering for the sake of those to whom he was to preach the merciful love of a crucified God. This apostolic motivation is all the stronger because he wanted the same experience for his religious. In fact, the penitential exercises of the Congregation, its trials and temptations, were regarded by Paul as forming part of the Passionist vocation, and as the preparation for the gift of prayer and transforming union, which prepares an

“apostolic” movement genuinely profitable to souls. He wanted his religious to be trained to suffer with great charity, trials and desolation, in silence, precisely with a view to producing “sweet and ripe fruit, steeped in every blessing for our neighbor, also.”

He wrote to the Master of Novices: “The Congregation of the Passion of Christ must proceed in this way, that is, in trials and temptations; its members must be very sound men, tested by much temptation *intus et foris*, with a view to accomplishing great things, especially these days, which are so dangerous, demanding souls strong in faith and well trained to endure great suffering (*Let.* II p.94). He wrote to the religious of Monte Cavo who were suffering much, physically and morally: “God permits these trials...so that the religious might be a holocaust in the fire of precious suffering for the glory of the Most High, and their sacrifice always exudes a sweet odor of every virtue to all the people, near and far” (*Let.* III, p.510). This particular state of desolation really corresponded with the desire God had awakened in him to be crucified with Jesus and covered with wounds (*scarnificato*), even if it was for only one person’s benefit (*Diario*, 23 Nov 4th & 6th Dec). He found encouraging the explanation of these terrible sufferings given by a person of great virtue: “Just as Our Lord gave salvation to souls in his extreme desolation, so He wants you to give it to them” (*Processes* I, p.128).

This participation in the desolation of Our Lord in Gethsemane and on the cross was so intense that it imposed on him a kind a suffering which he called “unrelieved suffering” (*nudo patire*), that is, without any tinge of joy. It left him with the feeling of total abandonment (H Martin, art. “Dereliction,” *DS*, t.3, col. 504-517) by everybody and even by God; at least, that is how it seemed to him. He tried to explain it as follows: “Alas! this soul had enjoyed the favors of heaven, and now it is forced for a time to be deprived of everything. Even more, it is brought to the point where it finds itself – or so it seems – abandoned by God. It has the feeling that God wants nothing more to do with it, is not longer interested in it, is very displeased with it. Hence the impression it has that everything it has done has been done badly. I would say it’s a kind of pain of damnation, pain which surpasses all other pain” (*Let.* I, p.153-154). Sometimes he finds this “unrelieved suffering” equivalent to “a stripping bare of the spirit,” meaning by that the suffering imposed by poverty so absolute that it makes him feel his own nothingness (*Let.* II, p.298). He must remain without the slightest relief (*Let.* III, p.806-807), in “this unrelieved suffering, in the silence of faith,” without complaining inwardly or outwardly, but simply repeating the words of Our Lord in Gethsemane; then he must go on in “the silence of faith,” to allow himself “to suffer martyrdom at the hands of holy Love” (*Let.* III, p.806-807). Whoever experiences “this trial of unrelieved suffering” gives himself up as a victim to “divine love” (*Let.* III p.287). His food is the Divine Will; he dies “this precious mystical death,” commending his soul, like Jesus, “to the bosom of his heavenly Father, saying: “Dear Father, into you hands I commend my spirit” (*Let.* III, p.226). This mystical experience of total abandonment to the Divine Will became a characteristic practice in his personal life, as the “Diary” (cf. M. 25th Nov., 30th Dec.) and many of his innermost thoughts expressed in his letters testify (Cf.M. Viller, “La Volonte de Dieu dans les lettres de S. Paul de la Croix,” *RAM*, t.27, 1951, p.132-174).

c. Contemplation of the Passion and the “Apostolic” Life.

The experience of the love of God revealed in the Passion of Our Lord led Paul towards those who ought to benefit from the fruits of this redeeming Passion. “When I thought of the offences committed against God, I was filled with sorrow to see Him thus offended, and I told Him I wanted to be covered with wounds (*scarnificato*), even if it only benefited one soul. Alas,

I felt as if I was fainting at the sight of so many souls being lost, souls who didn't enjoy the fruit of the Passion of my Lord" (*Diario*, 4th Dec.). Along with knowledge of the love and sufferings of our Savior, his desire for the conversion of sinners increased.

As has been said, Paul founded a Congregation to work for the good of souls. Generally, he prayed for the conversion of heretics, especially in England, and for the needs of the whole Church. In his sufferings he thought especially of making reparation for his own sins, but he was ready to sacrifice himself for one single soul. He wanted to make reparation for sins committed against the Holy Eucharist, and on two occasions expressed a desire to die for It. The following texts from the "Diary" support this statement. After Holy Communion he felt "... great fervor mixed with tears, imploring the conversion, of poor sinners. I told God that I could not bear to see Him offended any more. I experienced, too, a particular delight in asking Him in His goodness to found our holy Congregation without delay, and to send it vocations for His greater glory and the good of souls... I did this with great fervor and desire (7th Dec.; cf. also 9th Dec.). From the 15th to the 18th December he noted: "The constant desire for the conversion of sinners never leaves me and I feel impelled to ask God especially to grant this favor, because of this wish of mine never to see Him offended again." The influence of contemplation and his keen desire to suffer in union with Our Lord in no way weakened his commitment to work for the salvation of souls. Rather they gave it a solid foundation and rendered it fruitful.

d. *The Eucharist as a Memorial of the Passion of Christ.*

With Paul, the mystical experience is "sacramental mysticism." It does not depend in some remote fashion on baptism alone, "but immanently, or rather immediately, on the Eucharist" (Divo Barsotti, *L'Eucarestia in S. Paolo della Croce e teologia della preghiera*, Rome, 1980, p.10). Paul notes that the Eucharist causes him interior recollection in a way he cannot express; he experiences in a special way union with God and understanding of His love. On several occasions he speaks of the beneficial physical effect the Blessed Sacrament had on him after Communion "...was raised up in God in a special way, with a feeling of profound gentleness, and a glow in my heart which reached to my stomach. I recognized its supernatural character" (26th Nov., cf. 7th Dec.). It was after communion also that he received "infused understanding of the happiness the soul will enjoy" in heaven (4th Dec.) and of the deep humility he ought to have (30th Nov., 5th and 7th Dec.). It was his custom after communion to remind Our Lord of His Sacred Passion. Paul received a supernatural understanding which caused him to melt, as it were, with love and sorrow. "After receiving Holy Communion I was particularly recollected, especially when I reminded Our Lord of the loving and painful memory of His sufferings. The very special grace which my beloved Lord gives me at moments is beyond all possible explanation. I can only tell you that when I have recalled the memory of one or two of His torments to Our Lord, I have to stop because the soul can say no more; it feels utterly powerless" (8th Dec.). He feels the desire to die a martyr by witnessing to the truth of the Blessed Sacrament (26th Dec.). Contemplating "with bodily eyes my Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, I asked Him to send the Seraphim to pierce me with arrows of love"; and at communion, he experiences an ardent desire to have his thirst for Divine Love quenched. He asks Our Lord to allow him "to drink from the infinite spring of His Sacred Heart" (27th Dec.).

This experience of the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus was to remain in his doctrine and teaching; he wanted "to drink Love from rivers, from seas of fire, and to let all things be reduced to ashes" (*Let.* 1, p.473). He has a growing desire to see the Blessed Sacrament believed in and adored as "the unspeakable mystery of God's holy Love; to give his life for his faith and for the

Holy Eucharist” (*Diario*, 29th Dec.). He wants to make reparation for the lack of respect and for the offences committed against it “by weeping tears of blood” (29th Dec.). He had a deep understanding of the Eucharistic mystery, and the desire for reparation and adoration was to become part of this teaching; he was to inculcate it to those under his direction and to the religious of this Congregation.

He wrote to a nun: “One must fly to the Heart of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and there faint with sorrow on account of the marks of irreverence committed against It by bad Catholics, and by priests and religious, which is even worse, because in return for such great love they are guilty of sacrilege and ingratitude. To make reparation for such love, the devout soul must suffer as a victim” (*Let.* I. p.473; cf. 272). At the beginning of this retreat, he experienced an extraordinary grace after communion which drew from him the words: “Jesus my Spouse in the Blessed Sacrament.” Through the years Paul came to realize more and more that the Eucharist prepares one to participate in the Passion of Christ as a loving experience” (*Let.* I, p.194).

7. SPIRITUAL DOCTRINE

a. We Move on to Contemplation Through the Passion of Our Lord

Starting with his personal experience, which we have just mentioned, Paul states the principle that “we can only progress to boundless contemplation of the Divinity through the door of our Savior’s divine humanity” (*Let.* I, p.256). He developed this doctrine, taking his stand on the Johannine themes of Christ as “door” (cf. John 10:7,9), “way” (14:6), of Christ “in the bosom of the Father” (1:18). He also quotes Our Lord’s statement that no one can go to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). But these images are always referred to Christ in the mystery of His Passion. He repeats over and over again, with fresh emphasis each time, that one reaches the Trinity by an act of faith and charity, “passing through the door which is Christ our Lord, immersing oneself in the sea of His Sacred Passion, the greatest and most wonderful achievement of Divine Love” (*Let.* II p.499, cf.p.492; III p.748). Even at the highest level of contemplation the soul must never “lose sight” of the humanity of Christ – not that one must keep it in the imagination; rather it is thought of in loving mystical intuition “from the point of view of faith,” “...of love,” “simply from the point of view of faith and holy love” (*Let.* III, p. 747, etc).

This is a peculiarity of Paul – his insistence on presenting the Passion of Our Lord as the means which prepares for, and the way which leads to contemplation, solitude, detachment, silence, recollection. The Word, in order to introduce us to the love of the Father, “stripped Himself of His glory” (cf. Phil. 2:7; verses 6-11 of this chapter are most important in Paul’s spirituality; he directed his religious to say the conclusion of this Christological hymn at the beginning of each hour of the Divine Office). In the same way, by divesting ourselves of our self-importance, of our human outlook, by accepting “mystical death,” and by crucifying ourselves with Jesus, we shall receive the gift of transforming union, of intimate union with God in a deified life (*Let.* II, p.489, 496). To pass through the Passion means also in his opinion having a surer guarantee of not being deluded. “In your spiritual exercises,” he writes, “go on insisting on your nothingness, with purity of intention and great confidence in God; keep recollected in God within yourself, clothed with Jesus Christ and His Sacred Passion. Then you will not be deluded” (*Let.* II p.501-502; cf. 1 p.791).

b. To Make the Sufferings of Christ One’s Own out of Love

Contemplation by means of the Passion receives the grace of understanding from God , a special comprehension of the Passion as a work of love. Henceforth, those in whom the sufferings of Our Savior are “infused,” or on whom they are “imprinted,” desire to possess them all the time, and to experience them in reality as the seal and the source of God’s love for them in Jesus, and of their love in Jesus for the Father.

On this subject, Paul wrote to a religious, a superior and missionary: “The point your Reverence doesn’t grasp – to make one’s own by love the sacred sufferings of my gentle Lord – will be made clear by His Divine Majesty in His own good time. It is something wholly divine; the soul totally immersed in pure love, without the help of the imagination, by pure and simple faith (at the bidding of the Sovereign Good), suddenly finds itself plunged in the ocean of Our Savior’s sufferings; with the eyes of faith it understands them all, without the effort to understand them. Since the Passion of Christ is a work of love, there is in it a mixture of love and suffering. The spirit is impregnated with it, totally immersed as it in suffering loving suffering...” (*Let. III*, p.149). (Fred: is this quote correct?)

“To make the sufferings of Christ one’s own out of love” means actually participating in the sufferings of Our Lord, as Paul had done during his retreat (6th Dec.). It means, also, keeping those sufferings for one’s own good; being present out of love to Him who is present to us out of love, love which cost Him so dearly, and making all that one’s own in the beloved – an action co-natural to love. This experience is a gift of God, being the fruit of faith and supernatural charity, but one must make the effort, with the help of ordinary grace, to translate into action this impulse, peculiar to love, to unite oneself to the Beloved in making one’s own everything that is in Him. Paul repeats this: “Holy love is an intuitive virtue; it makes its own the sufferings of the one it really loves” (*Let. II*, p.440,458; *III*, p.398, 804; *V*, p.172). It is obvious that for Paul, it is a question of love influenced by a living faith (cf. *Let. I*, p.484-485). At the level of higher contemplation, purified love is necessary, where the “Divine Lover” draws the soul to Himself, and “deifies it through the sacred union with His Divine Majesty.” Then the soul will allow itself “to be saturated with the sufferings and the love of Jesus, remaining in holy silence and wonder, which increase still further its love for God.” Consequently, “immersed in the sufferings and sorrows of Our Lord, the soul forms a mixture of love and suffering,” thus practicing heroic virtue (to M.C. Bresciani, *Let. I*, p.488-489).

c. To Abandon Oneself to the Will of God

To participate in the suffering of Our Savior means also making our own His sentiments and His constant filial abandonment to the will of the Father. He is the model that we must imitate (*Let. IV*, p.170; *v*, p.25). To abandon oneself to the will of God means accepting everything that happens as if God Himself ordained it directly for us personally, “accepting everything directly from His loving hand” (*Let. V*, p.191). Paul was not the first to insist on this conformity or abandonment to the will of God. What distinguishes him is that he sees the Divine Will in the light of the Passion of Christ. He writes: “Just as Jesus though His food is to do the Will of His Father, is at the same time nourished constantly by suffering, interior and exterior, so that His life was one long cross,” so the soul which imitates Him, while conforming itself to the will of God will meet with crosses and trials (*Let. I*, p.574). This spiritual path has its stages; first, resignation; higher still, abandonment to the Divine Will; but “the highest perfection consists in being nourished, in a spirit of pure faith and love, on the Divine Will,” in the closest imitation of Our Savior, “who told His disciples that His food was to do the Will of His Father in Heaven” (*Let. I*, p.491).

One receives from the Father His Divine Will as food. From the human point of view “it tastes bitter, but in fact it is very sweet to the soul’s palate” (*Let.* I, p.341). Hence there is serenity and peace, even in the most severe trials. At the same time, graces of a more special kind are given, like a new baptism in the Holy Spirit. “Let us nourish ourselves on the Divine Will, and often be baptized in this pool of the fire of Divine Love. *Quotiescumque nos ipsos divine beneplacito resignamus, in Spiritu Sancto baptizamur, filii Dei efficimur*” (*Let.* II, p.404). To be nourished on the Divine Will does not mean passivity, but a commitment to do everything possible on our part to accomplish the Will of God. “I live with complete abandonment in the arms of our Heavenly Father like a little child, wishing to be nourished on His Holy Will, in Christ and through Christ. However, I must not neglect, according to my obligations, to use the means at my disposal” (*Let.* V, p.97). Perfection in the matter of abandonment to the Will of God can be assured by constant reception of the Holy Eucharist. In holy communion one is “assimilated” by Jesus and transformed into Him, burning with His love. Possessing in this way “the Heart of Jesus,” one may, like Him, make the Father’s Will one’s food in filial love (*Let.* III, p.190).

d. Contemplation of the Passion and the Apostolic Life

To contemplate the infinite love of God revealed in the Incarnation and Passion of the Word is to become aware of the salvific will of God, and to become like Christ in His commitment to give Himself to the mission of salvation. The more the apostolic life derives from the contemplation of Christ Crucified and our mystical union with Him, the more intense and fruitful it is. For Paul, the personal impression he bore of the wounds of Christ’s love was the best preparation for the apostolate. “Your Reverence has sent me the external signs of the Passion. May His Divine Majesty imprint them on your heart, engraving them with darts of His infinite charity, so that, burning with the fire of His holy love, you may tell of it to peoples, tribes, tongues and nations” (*Let.* IV, p.109). As we have already said, spiritual temptations and desolation were, in Paul’s view, an excellent preparation for the apostolic life (cf. *Let.* II, p.94; III, p.174, 418 etc). The most valuable and solid preparation for pastoral activity is derived from the mystical contemplation of the Passion, from the fact that one is penetrated by it and lives on it with love: “Remain in peace at the feet of the gentle Jesus, especially on His bare cross. During this time of holy peace in God, you will learn the science of the saints, and God will prepare you for the apostolic ministry” (*Let.* III, p.702). Only in this way will the religious be able “to preach to the whole world the infinite love of Christ which He has shown us especially in His Sacred Passion and Death” (*Let.* III, p.453).

To conclude this short account of Paul’s spiritual doctrine and experience, one may here quote S. Breton: “The Passion of Christ is the dominating element in Paul’s life. It is very much to the fore in intentionality as a privileged path to God. The mystery of God is contemplated through and in the Passion. The Cross summarizes all the possibilities for the spiritual life. Centered on conformity to the Passion, this form of spirituality lays less stress on the voluntary tension of “exercises” than on “passivity” of assimilation, total abandonment to the Divine Will. The conscious and organic psychological subject is obliterated before this delicate point, this central core of the spirit which, beyond the reach of nature and in its stark simplicity, is pure capacity for God” (*La Mystique.* P.50-51).

With regard to Paul’s indebtedness to other spiritual writers, it may be noted that he was particularly fond of St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis de Sales, and especially

Tauler, with whom he only become acquainted in 1747. In the “Diary” there are various references to the above-mentioned authors, especially St. Francis de Sales. Later, as he grew older, he made more use of images and sayings borrowed from Tauler, which helped him to understand and express what was happening in his interior life. What is required is a deeper study of Paul’s originality, gleaned from his own experience, freeing it from the rigid framework in which up to now his writings have been approached. There has been a tendency to see him through the mystical schema proper to St. John of the Cross (cf. Zoffoli, *op. cit.*, t.2, p.124-199; S. Breton, *La Mystique*, p.78-109).

8. THE PASSIONIST CONGREGATION

a. *Rules and Constitutions*

These were written between the 2nd and the 7th December, 1720, during Paul’s retreat. The original draft was incorporated by him into the copy presented to the Holy See, and approved in 1741 by a rescript, and in 1746 by a more solemn brief. In 1769 Clement XIV confirmed these rules, and by the bull “Supremi Apostolatus” approved the Institute as a Congregation with simple vows, enjoying the privileges of orders and congregations with solemn vows. Pius VI in September 1775 also confirmed the rules and the Institute as a Congregation with simple vows, by the bull “Praeclara virtutum exempla.” In 1755 the “Regulations” were added to the rules, to complete the daily organization of the life of the community, and especially to furnish authentic spiritual motivations for carrying out the acts prescribed in the rules. The rules clearly reflect the mystical experiences of Paul while he was writing them. There is an evangelical ring about them which echoes Our Lord’s discourse to the Apostles before He sent them on their mission.

b. *Spirituality*

The spiritual doctrine of the Congregation flows from the mystical experience of its founder. In accordance with Paul’s proper charism, it pursues his spirituality, centered on the memory of Christ’s Passion as a special manifestation of our Savior’s merciful love. This spirituality takes its place in the spiritual movement of the “imitation of the Apostles,” as it was understood in the 12th and 13th centuries, and understood by the congregations and “Observants” groups of the period preceding and following the Council of Trent. However, this emphasis on the Passion of Our Lord adds something new to this spiritual trend, namely a special need to practice poverty and penance. The Passionist Congregation may not possess fixed revenues; it lives on donations offered spontaneously.

The administration of these gifts is confided to lay managers (*sindaci*), to obviate the necessity of the religious having to deal with money (*Regulae* 44/1-III/19 svv.); Our “Holy Mother Church is requested to take possession of everything,” of monasteries and all donations (*Regulae* 54/1-III/19-39). Abstinence from meat was to be perpetual.

Fasting was also observed permanently until 1746. It was then reduced to three days a week throughout the year, except in Lent and Advent. Up to 1746 the religious also went barefoot; they were then permitted to wear sandals. They slept on a straw mattress; they were allowed blankets, but no sheets. This austerity expressed in a practical way the mystical participation in the penitential poverty of Our Lord, “who died naked on a hard wooden cross.” And at the same time it allowed God “in His infinite mercy to transform the individual religious into His holy love” (*Regulae* 54/1-III/1-15).

Passionist spirituality is “apostolic” because the religious imitate the Apostles by remaining with Jesus in the “desert,” far from the crowd (cf. Mark 6:31) in their retreats (*ritiri*), which are founded in solitude to give to those “who are no longer of this world every opportunity to sanctify themselves for the good of their neighbor” (Paul of the Cross, *La Congregazione ... cos’è e cosa vuole*, *Notizie* 47, n.6). In this solitude the religious lives in prayer and fasting, reciting the Divine Office night and day in union with the whole Church, to praise God, to pray for the conversion of the world and for his own perseverance. In addition to the Divine office, about three hours were spent by the community in personal prayer, and about an hour at Mass. All of which contemplation and penance was meant to create the “faculty for interior recollection and for leading a genuine apostolic life, which consists in dedication to souls and constant prayer and contemplation, not necessarily by being always on one’s knees, but by remaining in profound and intimate recollection, completely impregnated with the love of God” (*Let.* II, p.752; cf. p.662; III, p.145-146).

This spirituality embraces also fraternal communion because it is “apostolic” and means meeting at the foot of Christ Crucified. This community structure continues even during a “mission.” Before leaving the retreat, in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, religious about to set out on missions promise obedience to the priest appointed to be their superior. During the mission they take their meals together. They also recite the Divine Office and make their meditation together. They discuss the progress of the mission and decision to be taken (*Regulae* 90/II-III/35 sw).

Passionist spirituality is also one of “remembrance” with love and gratitude for the divine love shown in the Passion of Christ. The religious wear a black habit to remind themselves “that they are in constant mourning for the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ” (*Regulae* 12/1-II/15-40; 20/1/33-36). They take a vow “to promote among the faithful the memory of, and devotion to, the life-giving Passion and Death of Our Savior” (30/1-III/10-15). “The sign of salvation” – a heart surmounted by a cross with the name of Jesus and the title of the Passion inscribed inside it – is meant to remind the religious who wear it, and those who see it, “that the mission of Passionists is to preach the bitter suffering of Our Divine Lord, and to promote in all hearts true devotion to them” (*Let.* II, p.218). The presence of Jesus in the tabernacle of the monastery chapel is an assurance of that intimate union in Him of “poor children” and “ignorant disciples” (*Let.* V, p.38) who stay as long as possible with Him, “so that their hearts may be perpetually on fire with the holy love of God” (*Regulae* 76/II-III/55 svv.). Their apostolic activity will allow the religious to arouse the memory of Our Lord’s Passion among the people; they will be able to teach them how to meditate on it, and show them how it takes away sin and leads to great sanctity (*Regulae* 4/I-III/1-11; 4/1-III/14-20).

d. “Apostolic” Activity

The word apostolic is put in inverted commas to indicate that it is to be understood in the tradition of imitation of the Apostles and that consequently a contemplative and mystical life forms an integral part of the active life, and colors its external expression. By virtue of its particular charism, the Congregation wishes to bring about in the Church a new and profound consciousness of God’s love, especially as it is revealed in the Passion and Death of Christ. Therefore, in the various form of “itinerant” preaching proper to apostles (popular missions, retreats, catechesis, discussions, administrations of the sacraments, spiritual direction), a leading role must be given to meditation on the mystery of salvation and the faithful taught how to meditate on it in a manner suitable to their circumstances.

The same object was pursued in inviting to the solitude of the retreats those who wanted to spend a few days in prayer. Books and pamphlets were used, but in a small way, because of the cost. There was no organized movement among the laity to imitate the Passionist spiritual life. The Congregation, not having solemn vows, could not institute a third order nor a confraternity in the strict sense. Permission to found a confraternity was granted by Pius IX. Subsequently, the Confraternity of the Passion was instituted.

d. *Growth of the Congregation*

Up to 1840 the Congregation was confined to Central Italy. In that year, a monastery was established in Belgium, and in 1841 Blessed Dominic of the Mother of God founded the Congregation in England (cf. *DS*, t.3,co1. 1534-1539). In 1852 the Passionist went to the United States, and in 1878 to Spain, and gradually spread to South America, Australia and France. In 1924, the Congregation established itself in Germany and Poland. It had already been founded in Wallachia and Bulgaria in 1782, functioning directly under the authority of Propaganda. By 1981 its members lived and worked in fifty-two nations.

e. *Spiritual Authors*

(In this section, in the original, are several paragraphs giving the names of some Passionist authors of books on various aspects of spirituality and a selection of titles. The references extend from 1796 to 1981).

Editor's note. Fr. Fabiano concludes his article with several columns of bibliography concerning St. Paul of the Cross and the Congregation of Passionists. Since the vast majority of the titles are not in English, they are not included here. However, they are fundamental and further research can be made by consulting the original article, *Dictionnaire de Spiritualite*, Vol. XII (1983), cols. 558-560.