

## Passionist Charism and the Memoria Passionis

Elissa Rinere, C.P.

The focus of this seminar is on the Passion of Jesus and specifically on the “memoria passionis,” that distinct aspect of Passionist identity articulated by St. Paul of the Cross in the founding of the Congregation of the Passion. There is a direct link from this inspiration of St. Paul of the Cross to the founding of my own congregation almost 100 years after his death.

Inspiration is a gift of the Spirit of God. No inspiration or gift of the Spirit belongs to any one congregation, but all belong to the entire church. It is this fact of what might be called “universal ownership” which ultimately unifies all inspirations, and their spiritual expressions, in the One Spirit of God.

However, considering a particular religious institute founded on a particular inspiration which has possessed and been possessed by a particular individual, the inspiration is then in some sense “owned” by that institute. It is in a certain sense institutionalized, which at first sight seems antithetical to the nature of a spiritual entity.

In founding his institute, St. Paul of the Cross “captured” the inspiration of keeping alive the memory of the Passion. We understand this “keeping alive the memory,” not as a static recollection, but as a dynamic activity which transcends time. It is a joining time and eternity, akin to Eucharistic anamnesis.

It is clear in the 1775 Rule written by St. Paul of the Cross that the essence of Passionist identity was and is uniquely expressed in the fourth vow to promote “memoria passionis” among the faithful. This was accomplished primarily through the institute’s primary apostolates - retreats, sermons, hearing confessions, lessons in meditation for the faithful - and upheld by community life and prayer which, in turn, fostered the interior disposition of the community members. That is, the members of the institute were to be holy themselves since only then would they be able to keep alive the memory of the Passion through their preaching, missions, confessions and other sacramental ministries.

I hope you will agree that this “memoria passionis” is the hallmark, or, in today’s vocabulary, “the brand” of the Congregation of the Passion. The current Constitution of the Congregation of the Passion states about this fourth vow: “By this vow our Congregation takes its place in the Church” (n. 6). To me, this means that the fourth vow is the unique characteristic that provides Passionist identity within the Church. It distinguishes the institute founded by St. Paul of the Cross from all other religious institutes. So, the inspiration begins with an individual and the first followers. The inner disposition of individuals carries the inspiration forward. Then a second factor comes into play which is corporate in nature. Corporate apostolate, community life, buildings and so on. One might call it an arc of development, from simplicity to complexity. All the factors work together to solidify identity.

Thus, these two factors - institutional and personal - are intertwined and interdependent and proportional. External factors are easily measurable; number of residences, retreat centers, missions, communities etc. The personal factors are less measurable, and even somewhat invisible, but not

entirely. Personal commitment to the charism can be seen, usually, in apostolic effectiveness, energy, community relationships, in prayer, generosity and joy.

Ideally, when these exterior and interior factors are in perfect balance, nurturing one another, the “brand” is clear. When there is clarity of purpose in the corporate mission, and community life complements it, and individual commitment is evident, the founding inspiration or charism is actualized. It is clear, for all who would want to know, who Passionists or Dominicans or Franciscans are, and what they are dedicated to.

What happened when the founding inspiration of the Passionist Congregation, this call to keep alive the Memory of the Passion in the hearts of the faithful, was adopted by women of 19th century England, who did not have available to them the conduct of missions, retreats, confessions or public preaching? How was this unique inspiration adapted to their religious lives, in a way suited to the circumstances of 19th century England? And how has that initial inspiration handed on by St. Paul of the Cross been brought by Passionist Sisters into the present day?

This brings us first to a bit of history, and then to some thoughts on what it means to be a community of Passionist women.

## **History**

Our Foundress, Elizabeth Prout, was born in Shrewsbury, England in September 1820, and baptized in the local Anglican parish shortly after. In 1841 we know that she was living in the city of Stone, just two miles from the first Passionist monastery founded in England, Ashton Hall. We know, too, that Elizabeth was received into the Catholic Church at some point between 1842 and 1845.

Her earliest exposure to Roman Catholicism came, at various times, from the preaching and guidance of, first, Blessed Dominic Barberi, and then Gaudentius Rossi and Ignatius Spencer - all Passionists of happy memory!

It was under the guidance of these Passionists that she learned of Catholicism, and later undertook her first work as a teacher. This led directly to the founding, in 1852, of the Sisters of the Holy Family, as we were first known. The early years of the Sisters of the Holy Family were filled with trials and tribulation, but there was also much courage and perseverance. By the time of the death of Elizabeth Prout in January 1864, the sisters were teaching, doing parish visitation and providing safe haven for young women and girls who worked in the factories in and around the city of Manchester.

In the earliest Rule for the Sisters of the Holy Family, completed by Fr. Gaudentius in 1852, his deep Passionist roots are clear. He kept the concept of “Keeping alive the memory,” so integral to the Passionist charism, but with a slight change. The “memoria,” the keeping alive in our hearts, was directed, not to the Passion, but to the Holy Family. “To honor and imitate in a special manner the mode of life of the Holy Family at Nazareth.” The goal of this “memory” of the Holy Family was to express the value of work as a blessing; so that the sisters would be, in their own lives, a living memory of the Holy Family, making the Holy Family present and active wherever the sisters were.

To inculcate this “memory” there were several communal factors set out in the early Rule; common dress, communal prayer including Mass, Office, meditation, various devotions, penances, celebra-

tions of feasts, even the “robust” singing of hymns especially on feast days, all intended to aid recollection and to keep the Holy Family present to the sisters in the midst of everyday activities.

In the definitive biography of Elizabeth Prout, it is noted that the original wish of Elizabeth Prout and Father Gaudentius intent was to establish an institute of Passionist Sisters, but because of communication difficulties of the day, Gaudentius was unable to obtain the needed permissions from the Father General in Rome to take this step. Consequently, the new institute was dedicated to the Holy Family.

It must also be noted that one of the unique characteristics of the newly founded institute was that there was no requirement for a dowry. That is, women who were poor, or of lower social classes, were welcomed into the community without hesitation. This extraordinary innovation made religious life available for any women who felt called, without obstacle, but it also meant that the financial situation of the institute was precarious, at best. From the beginning, it was necessary for the sisters to be self-supporting. They had to be engaged in work that paid a salary.

According to the 1852 Rule, and in keeping with the times about what was understood to be proper behavior for women, the first preference was for work which could be done in the convent, to avoid the need for the sisters to be going out. This meant needlework, making vestments mostly, and the remuneration was very, very minimal. However, because Elizabeth and some of her companions were teachers, this requirement for working in the convent was flexible. Those who taught went to the schools where the children were. Other of the sisters went to work in factories in and around the city of Manchester, sharing the deplorable conditions with the women and children who also worked there. Of course, at this time there were no legal or safety protections for factory workers.

Thus, from the very beginning, the “keeping alive the memory of the Holy Family” was never tied to a particular ministry or apostolate. The charism was taken into the marketplace, so to speak, in response to the necessities of life.

Again, according to the 1852 Rule, there were communal factors which fostered the “living memory” of the Holy Family: community life, prayer and devotions were strong and highly regulated. Community life and personal commitment to the work ethic of the Holy Family carried the community forward.

### **Aggregation**

Although our roots had always been intertwined with the Congregation of the Passion, it wasn't until just a few months after Elizabeth Prout's death that the formal process of “aggregation” to the Passionists began. The Superior General at that time, Fr. Peter Paul Cayro, the first Passionist General ever to visit England, said that aggregation was appropriate since the young community was “Passionist in everything but name.” Despite many fits and starts, including delays because of political unrest in Italy, the aggregation process finally concluded in 1887, after 43 years, with the approval of the Constitutions for the Sisters of the Cross and Passion.

The Constitution originally approved by Rome in 1887 and then amended in 1927 according to the then new Code of Canon Law, stated the following about the spirituality of the institute:

As this congregation is affiliated to and bears the same name as the Congregation of the Clerks of the Most Holy Cross and Passion of our Lord, Jesus Christ, founded by St. Paul of the Cross, the sisters should regard and venerate this glorious patriarch as their Father and Chief Protector.

That they may possess the same spirit which the Holy Founder has left to his children as a special inheritance, let them in a particular manner strive to keep alive in their hearts the memory of Jesus Crucified, and cultivate a most ardent and tender devotion to his most holy Passion and Death(#11).

This personal commitment would then be supported by the communal devotions and penances to be observed by every sister, and by the ordinary aspects of common life: habit, lifestyle, corporate witness.

The communal spiritual exercises mandated in the 1887 Rule included: one hour of silent meditation each morning, with the Passion of Jesus being a frequent subject; the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin; daily Mass, weekly confession; two daily exams, one during the day and one at night; rosary, various daily prayers to St. Joseph, St. Paul of the Cross and a few others; times of silence throughout the day, Stations of the Cross of Fridays, and various penances and mortifications including times of fast, abstinence, weekly and during Advent and Lent.

In other words, the whole of the day, literally almost every minute, was structured in order to focus each sister on the Memory of the Passion, which was the essence of the charism, and to avoid “dissipation of the mind.”

The 1887 Rule defined our apostolates as; establishing homes or refuges for women who worked in the factories with the chief object of forming them in devotion and piety, religion and domestic affairs and the rudiments of learning (#3). Also, schools for “the poorer classes” (#6) and, with permission from the parish priest, visitation of women in their homes, visitation of the sick and of those who had ceased the practice of their religion ( # 8,9,10).

Finally, the Rule stated that “although the sisters do not take a fourth vow, they should promote devotion to the Passion in the hearts of all those whom they care for or educate (#13).

With that Rule of life in place from 1887 and well into the 20th century, the Sisters of the Cross and Passion grew in numbers, influence and resources. From the United Kingdom, and Ireland, the sisters went to establish Passionist life for women in the United States, in Chile, Argentina, Peru, Botswana, the West Indies, and more recently in Australia.

For several years we had many schools and institutions which gave immediate visibility to the community. We had many convents, some of them housing large numbers of sisters. Wherever we went, a standard community life was maintained which, through prayer, devotions, penances and other practices was intended to foster personal commitment to the charism.

The factors that made the “brand” visible were all operating well. There was a strong sense of identity and mission. The observable manifestation of the original inspiration, was clear.

Then came Vatican II with its mandate to all religious to renew, which meant going back to what *Perfectae caritatis* called the institute's primitive inspiration; and to adapt, which meant to make changes required by the conditions of the modern day. Virtually all religious communities went through a significant period of upheaval, with regular Chapters and extraordinary Chapters during which Constitutions were revised and rewritten and refocused.

For us, there was an initial effort at rewriting produced by the General Chapter of 1971 which responded to the mandates of Vatican II, and then a completely new rule, "The Covenant of the Passion," finally approved in October 1986, which incorporated Vatican II with points from the then newly revised 1983 Code of Canon Law.

In the Rules of 1852, 1887 and 1927, there was a list of apostolates in which the sister would engage: schools, social work, hostels for women, parish visitation. Then, in 1986, there was a significant change. The Covenant of the Passion states: "The corporate mission of the members of the Congregation is to be prophets of the Paschal Mystery in the midst of the sufferings of the world" (# 51).

There is mention of education and social work as part of our history, but the Covenant goes on: "While we continue these pastoral activities, our response to the needs of time and place is characterized by flexibility..." (#52).

While not mandating specific changes, this flexibility to address the needs of time and place led to varied choices with respect to apostolate, in accord with an individual sister's talents and interests, and the needs of the place in which she lived. This process led, in turn, to a steady decrease in the number of schools and other institutions either staffed by or owned by the Sisters of the Cross and Passion. It was as if we were rediscovering mobility, and responding to immediate needs, as Elizabeth Prout and her first companions had done. The external factors of corporate apostolate and visible institutions were receding. We were, as Vatican II had directed, returning to the qualities of our "primitive inspiration."

Concerning communal prayer; as previously mentioned, the 1887 Rule provided a fairly detailed list of prayers to be said in common each day, all with the goal of fostering personal devotion to the "memory of the Passion." The 1986 Covenant treats communal and private prayer in a series of positive value statements. Participation in the Eucharist is transformational; the Liturgy of the Hours sanctifies the entire course of the day; fidelity to prayer leads to a contemplative vision by which God is revealed in the ordinary events of life.

In our prayer we are to give special honor to our Foundress, Elizabeth Prout; each local community determines some form of communal penance to be observed on Fridays and during Lent; we pray for each other, family, friends and benefactors, living and dead.

The section of the Covenant dealing with community life is focused, not on structures or horarium, but on relationships within the community, a topic not previously mentioned in earlier documents. Initially, in the 1887 Rule, it was communal prayer that was related to success in the apostolate. Now, ninety-nine years later in 1986, it is the quality of our being together in community which impacts our

apostolates. “Each sister has a responsibility to create and deepen community through a true sharing of life. ... Where community life is healthy, the dynamism and interests of the members reach out to the larger community of the province, of the Congregation and of the Church as a whole” (#.33).

Finally, commitment to the Passionist charism is recognized as a gift of the Spirit to an individual, not to an institute. That recognition is clear from the opening sentences of the Covenant: “Identification with Jesus Christ in the mystery of his Passion, Death and Resurrection is at the heart of our vocation. ... We are dedicated to keeping alive the memory of Jesus Crucified, so that all may discover God’s love which reaches its greatest expression on the Cross” (# 2).

Here, we see a transformation. We began in simplicity, then had a period of time when the charism was made manifest by institutional factors and communal factors and personal factors, we come now to a place in which the charism is so much more dependent on the inner disposition of the members of the community. There are no very few, if any, other vehicles or structures. As it was in the beginning....

### **Current Situation**

Just a few years ago, we undertook a congregation-wide study of the Covenant of the Passion and considered the question of whether what had been written almost thirty years ago, in 1986, still reflected the manner in which we lived out our Passionist commitment today, in the 21st century.

In that study, which went on for three years, we articulated very well the changes that have come about in our lives since 1986 when we began to make the Covenant of the Passion our true Rule of Life. We called them “shifts” or points of evolution in our religious lives. The study identified eight of these shifts, each very significant in its own context. And we identified one point of unchanging truth. Here, we will mention three of these points of evolution and the one unchanging truth.

First, we identified a shift in apostolate from large institutions owned and operated by the community to smaller and individual ministries. The Covenant had opened the door to this evolution by encouraging a response to needs of the present day. This new approach to apostolate came to pass over the course of thirty years.

Second, we identified a shift in community life, from living in large communities to living in small groups or even alone, depending on circumstances. Small group living, we noted during our study sessions, requires new interpersonal skills not necessarily essential in large group living. Some of us had difficulty adjusting to small group living. Again, the door to this evolution in community was heralded in the Covenant of the Passion with its emphasis on interpersonal relationships, rather than horarium and structure, as the foundation for community life.

Third, we identified a shift in our style of praying, from “saying prayers” to more deep and personal prayer, not necessarily communal in character. This, again, had been made possible through the Covenant through its statements on the value of prayer, but without mandates on what prayers were to be “said.”

Finally, the unchanging truth - there was total unanimity around the statements in the Covenant of the

Passion that express the core of who we are as Passionists. We refer to “Norm 2” as the heart of the matter.

Identification with Jesus Christ in the mystery of His Passion Death and Resurrection is at the Heart of our vocation.

We are dedicated to keeping alive the memory of Jesus Crucified, so that all may discover God’s love which reaches its greatest expression on the Cross.

This is the gift of the Spirit that each of us has received. There is a direct connection from each of us to the gift given to St. Paul of the Cross and to Elizabeth Prout and her first companions. We realize that our charism, our “primitive inspiration,” of “keeping alive the memory of the Passion” is living and dynamic, and continuously evolving. In these days we strive to understand the charism through the lens of Justice Peace and the Integrity of Creation. How do we incarnate our charism in new ways to respond to the needs of the present moment?

One other aspect of our “marketplace charism” is found in our associate programs throughout the Congregation. This is shared by men and women of all ages and backgrounds who are drawn, not so much to us but to our charism - our keeping alive the Memory of the Passion. It makes sense to them. It gives comfort and makes the difficulties of everyday life bright with promise. I can speak for associates in my country, only. These men and women study the writings of St. Paul of the Cross, and our congregation’s history, they love Elizabeth Prout; they pray, they make “covenants” or commitments to do good works in keeping with their individual circumstances. Most importantly, they bring the charism into new places; into marriage and family, homes and businesses. Quite simply, they feel called to the charism, as all of us do, and they have received it as a gift from the Spirit of God.

## **Conclusion**

The Passionist Sisters have been on quite a journey for the last 150 years. From humble beginnings in Industrial England, then all through the 20th century and now into the 21st century.

We are certainly fewer in numbers now, and older. Some would say that we, along with all religious life in the Northern Hemisphere, have been on a track of steady decline for the past 30 years or more, since about 1980. Others would say western culture has parted company with Christianity, bringing about a crisis of faith for many. Others would say that the Church in general is in decline, and all Church-related institutions feel the impact. Still others, despite the general trends, point to signs of hope and new life throughout the Congregation. No one knows what God has in store for us. In one way, it makes little difference, since all we can do is the best we can do - which is what we have always tried to do.

I would suggest that the major part of this common journey has been the journey of the charism through various stages of regulation, institutional strength, community structures back to what Perfectae caritatis called the “primitive inspiration” of personal commitment alone. This journey has brought us to a stronger sense of who we are as a community of apostolic women in the Church, and it has made the charism more accessible to us and those we serve.

## **For reflection:**

What is charisma?

What are the elements that constitute attraction to a specific charisma? How does that differ from a religious vocation?

Is a vocation to a specific institute possible without an attraction to its “primitive inspiration”? Can a religious institute become too complex, so that membership relies more on the corporate structures for identity, rather than what is held in their hearts?

---

*Edna Hamer. Elizabeth Prout, 1820-1864: A Religious Life for Industrial England. Southampton: Hobbs Printing, 1984. Ibid., especially Chapter VII.*

## **RESOURCES**

*Rule and Constitutions, Congregation of the Passion of Jesus Christ. Approved March 2, 1984.*

*Rule of the Discalced Clerics of the Most Holy Cross and Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, 1775.*

*Rule and Constitutions of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Most Holy Cross and Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Approved June 21, 1887 and April 28, 1928.*

*Covenant of the Passion: Constitutions of the Sisters of the Cross and Passion. Approved, November 21, 1986.*