

Promoting the Memory of the Passion The Experience of the first Passionists

Paul Francis Spencer CP

When we think of the origins of the Passionist Charism, we think immediately of St Paul of the Cross. The inspirations and intuitions were his and it was he who wrote the Rule and the earliest texts of Passionist spirituality. However, at the heart of this movement was the desire to gather companions who would “live together and announce the Gospel of Christ”. Paul’s project was never a solitary one; it was to be lived out with companions who would have a shared form of life and a shared mission. In looking at the beginnings of a life and mission dedicated to the Memory of the Passion, we will consider not only Paul’s own experience but also that of his companions, the first Passionists.

The unity of life and mission as an experience of the Memory of the Passion is made explicit in the very first chapter of Paul’s Rule. In the earliest complete text of the Rule, the so-called “Altieri text” of 1736, we read:

“As one of the principal aims of this least Congregation consists not only in being untiring in holy prayer for our own good in order to attain holy union with God, but also in leading our neighbors to do the same, by teaching them how to proceed in such an angelic exercise in the easiest way possible, the brothers of this congregation who shall be recognized as capable, should during missions as well as at other times on the occasion of any devout exercise, teach the people aloud meditation on the divine mysteries of the most holy Life, Passion and Death of Jesus, our true Good. During the mission they should do this after the sermon, and at other times when it shall be judged more appropriate. They will also promote it in the sacred tribunal of penance and in any other spiritual conference, as a most effective way of destroying vice and leading souls to great holiness in a short time.”

Like many of his companions, Paul’s primary avenue for promoting what he called the “devout and grateful remembrance” of the Passion of Jesus was the preaching of missions. The meditation on the Passion, given after the sermon, as described above, was for Paul “the soul of the Mission” which should never be omitted. The formation given in those early years included guidance on how to teach people how to pray the Passion and teaching on how the various Passion elements of a mission were to be approached. We see this in the instructions on sacred eloquence given by St Vincent Mary Strambi.

In the Letters of St Paul of the Cross, we see how Paul is always encouraging people to practice daily meditation on the Passion. Even towards the end of his life, in 1770, he writes to Giulio Palomba:

“But, above all, I beg the gentle Jesus to impress on your heart a continuous, tender, and devout memory of the holy Passion, efficacious means to be holy in your state. For this reason, I beg his Divine Majesty to grant you the grace not to let a day pass without meditating on some mystery of the Passion for a half-hour, or at least a quarter of an hour, since by this means, I assure you, you will preserve your soul free from all sin and rich in virtue, all the more if you unite this devout meditation with a devout frequentation of the holy sacraments and the reading of spiritual books.”

Here we see Paul encouraging the use of spiritual reading as a support for meditation. Books of meditation on the Passion were popular in the eighteenth century. Among the better known authors were the Capuchins Antonio of Olivadi and Gaetano Maria of Bergamo. The latter continued to be popular into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when his “Thoughts and Affections” on the Passion were translated into English twice by Passionists. Less well known in the English-speaking world is the fact that a number of books on praying the Passion were written by the first Passionists, some of which were published during the Founder’s lifetime and others within the years following his death. These books on how to meditate on the Passion are generally very simple in their approach and exemplify that “easiest way possible” proposed in the Rule.

The earliest of these was published in Camerino in 1750 with the title “The Passion of Jesus Christ in Forty Short Meditations recommended by the Most Reverend Father Paul of the Cross”. An example of how this little book works can be seen below in Meditation VII, “Jesus goes to the Garden of Gethsemane”. The meditation has an introduction and then three parts which describe the events of this section of the Passion story. Each of the three parts concludes with a lesson about prayer and the following of Christ:

“After speaking to them and singing the hymn in thanksgiving, Jesus left the Upper Room with the eleven Apostles, and entered the Garden of Gethsemane.

1. He goes to the garden, as was his custom, and, after addressing them, he withdraws to a solitary place to pray and, by this prayer, to prepare himself for the Passion.

Learn to never leave aside, on account of any work or danger, your usual devout practices, especially prayer and, in time of greatest need, pray more often, and with greater fervour.

2. Jesus prays prostrate, with his face to the earth, and his entire prayer is spent in acts of love, and confidence in his Eternal Father, abnegation of his will and total resignation to the Divine Will.

Learn how to pray: with reverence, and interior and exterior humility: with a loving and childlike trust in God: with the offering of your whole self, and perfect conformity to the Divine Will.

3. Jesus encourages the Disciples to pray, that they may not fall into temptation: he comes to them and, finding them sleeping, he gently scolds them.

Learn that prayer is the only way to overcome temptations; and without prayer you will fall, as the Apostles fell; that God sees you, and comes to you with his graces when you pray; that the sleep of laziness and lukewarmness is reproved by Christ, because it disposes you to serious falls.”

What we see here is an attempt to lead the reader through the events of a particular scene from the Passion of Christ, while at the same time proposing attitudes and responses which relate the scene to the person’s life.

In a later book, written by Fr John Mary Cioni and published in 1769, the author says in the preface that he is writing this work because “one of the purposes for which the Missions of Discalced Clerks of the Passion of Jesus Christ are mainly intended is to instil in the heart of the listener a true and constant devotion to the Suffering Redeemer”. He explains how he has already written a book which, in its first part, explains how to meditate on the Passion and, in its second part, gives a series of thirty meditations on the Passion, one for each day of the month. However, realising that many people need

something shorter and more accessible, he has come up with a book of what he calls “aspirations” in which he takes a sentence from Scripture which relates to the Passion and gives a very short reflection on it. This way of praying the Passion, he says, “does not demand that longer period of time which is needed for the exercise of Meditation, and in addition manages to be much easier in other respects.”

Like their founder, the first Passionists looked for ways of promoting the Memory of the Passion which were accessible and adapted to people’s life situation. They sought in this way to bring others to a relationship with God. For Paul and his companions, preaching was a special way of communicating their message to large audiences. They also recognised the role of the printed word in furthering their mission. At the same time, they gave a significant emphasis to the personal dimension of their communicating the message, through letters, retreats and spiritual direction.