

The memoria passionis in the writings of St. Paul of the Cross

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Introduction

“The sacred passion is a work of love.” Loving and suffering - in this brief investigation of the remembrance of the suffering of Christ in the writings of St Paul of the Cross (1694 - 1775) we shall be examining these two expressions and their intrinsic relationship to each other.

Even our human experience teaches us that there can be no true love without suffering. Love always desires what is best for the beloved person. As a general rule this will not be possible without some form of sacrifice and self-denial. Love leads us to open up our innermost being to an intimate other and thus to surpass ourselves. This form of “ecstasy”, this movement of letting go and being willing to become involved with another individual always involves the overcoming of egoism and hence an experience of dying.

Our Lord Jesus Christ expressed this correlation in an inimitable way when he said: “This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you. There is no greater love than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15, 12-13)

The sacrifice of His life by the God-man Jesus Christ on the Cross is thus the ultimate expression of the love of God for mankind. In His great love for us humans, God aimed to show us the way which will lead us out of our human misery. He did this by taking this misery upon Himself and transforming it through His love.

Benedict XVI writes on this subject in “Jesus von Nazareth”:

“In His Sacrifice on the Cross Jesus lays so to speak all the sins of the world in the love of God and in so doing takes them away from us. Approaching the Cross, entering into communion with Christ means entering into a sphere of transformation and forgiveness.”

Again he writes:

“Where the world with all the injustice and the cruelty which defile it, comes into contact with the infinitely pure - that is where He is, the Pure One who is at the same time also the stronger. In this touch the squalor of the world is truly absorbed, removed, transformed in the pain of unending Love.”

The decisive element in the human salvation process is thus that the Love of God can touch and transform our human suffering.

“The love I speak of is not our love for God, but the love he showed us in sending his Son as the remedy for the defilement of our sins.” (1 John, 4, 10)

On this, Joseph Ratzinger observes in his “Einführung in das Christentum” (“Introduction to Chris-

tianity”):

“Correspondingly, in the New Testament the Cross appears primarily as a movement from up above to down below. It does not stand there as the gesture of reconciliation which offers mankind to the wrathful God, but as an expression of that foolish love of God, which gives itself away and suffers humiliation in order to save mankind; it is His reaching out towards us, and not vice versa.”

We as humans were saved by God not from suffering, but in suffering. In that God’s love in Jesus Christ embraces our suffering and our death and accepts them, we are no longer alone in this fundamentally human experience of suffering. In communion with Christ our path of suffering can become a path of love, which ultimately leads to everlasting life.

Mystics are great lovers of God, who have gained a deep insight into the nature of true love. This also applies to our founder Paul of the Cross, whom M. Viller regards as “the greatest Italian mystic of the eighteenth century”.

For Paul, the suffering of Christ was *“the greatest and most astounding work of divine love”* (L. II, 499), indeed he even calls it *“the wonder of wonders of divine love”* (L. II, 726). In a letter he writes: *“The sacred passion is a work of love. I need say nothing more.”* (L. II, 450)

In the following text I shall show with the help of a number of quotes from the writings of the founder of the Passionists the extent to which the remembrance of the suffering of Christ was linked for him to the remembrance of that love which redeemed the world.

1. The Spiritual Diary of 1720

Even in his earliest work, the Spiritual Diary of 1720, this fundamental conviction of St. Paul of the Cross is clearly recorded. It can be seen, for example, in the following entry dated 27 November: *“Your pains, dear God, are pledges of your love!”*

Just how clearly Paul of the Cross recognised the profound love behind the visible agony of the suffering of Christ, through which we are saved, can be seen clearly in the following excerpt dated 8 December:

“At holy Communion I was particularly recollected, especially in a sorrowful and loving remembrance of the sufferings of my Jesus. This high favour which the good God grants me at such a time I know not how to explain because I cannot. You must know that in recalling the sufferings of my dear Jesus, sometimes when I have only recalled one or two, I have to stop because the soul can say no more and feels that it is melting away. It remains thus languishing with the greatest sweetness mingled with tears, with the sufferings of the Spouse infused into it; or to express it more clearly - it is immersed in the Heart and in the sorrows of its beloved Spouse, Jesus. Sometimes it understands them all, and remains thus in God in this loving and sorrowful contemplation. It is very difficult to explain; it always seems to me to be something new.”

True love strives increasingly to become one with the beloved person. If the Passion of Christ is the

deepest expression of His love for us humans, that means conversely for Man, to comprehend the suffering as a possibility of seeking loving communion with Christ.

Paul expressed this insight on 21 December thus:

“I would like to make everyone understand the great grace that God, in his mercy, bestows when he sends suffering, especially suffering devoid of consolation. Then indeed the soul is purified like gold in the furnace; without knowing it becomes radiant and is set free to take flight to its Good, that is to the blessed transformation. It carries the cross with Jesus and knows it not. This arises from the number and variety of sufferings which makes it forget everything and no longer remember that it suffers. I understand that this is a great and fruitful way of suffering, most pleasing to God, because the soul thereby becomes indifferent to such an extent that it no longer thinks of sorrow or joy but solely of remaining conformed to the holy Will of its beloved Spouse, Jesus. It desires above all else to be crucified with him because in this it is more conformable to its beloved God, who during his whole life did nothing but suffer.”

2. The “Accounts” of 1747 and 1768

In order to broadcast the founding of his order, after the first official rule confirmation through the Holy See in 1741 Paul of the Cross recorded so-called “Accounts” in the form of letters, that is to say short descriptions of his newly established order which represented a sort of summary of the content of the rules of the order. These “Accounts” were addressed above all to persons who might exert influence on young people with a view to their possible vocation to a life within the order.

The longest and best developed “Accounts” are the ones dating from 1747 and 1768. In them can be found in concise form the content of the version of the rules of 1746 and a description of the life of the congregation and its aims. They reflect the charisma of the saint which resulted in a new, authentic form of religious life.

The “Accounts” aim to present a community which is dedicated above all to the Apostolate of “Remembrance” in a world which is constantly in danger of forgetting the origin of its salvation. The very heart of the proclamation order which the Passionists received from their founder is clearly outlined right at the beginning of the two texts mentioned above.

“Our great Father of Mercies has been pleased to raise up a new Order or Institute in His Holy Church at this pitiable and distressing time when we now see openly at work every kind of iniquity, with harm also to our holy faith which is keenly affected in many parts of Christianity. The world is sliding into a profound forgetfulness of the most bitter sufferings endured by Jesus Christ, our true Good, out of love, while the memory of His Most Holy Passion is practically extinct in the faithful.

For that reason this new Congregation aims to root out both disorders and endeavors to remove vice, to foster virtue, and to set souls again on the way of perfection to heaven, by promoting devotion to the Passion which is the most efficacious means for obtaining every good.”

Elsewhere, he writes:

“The most efficacious means for the conversion of sinners and for the sanctification of souls is the

frequent remembrance of the Passion of Jesus Christ, from the forgetfulness of which proceed deplorable evils and disorders.

Therefore our most merciful God in His infinite Goodness granted strong and gentle inspirations to establish this poor Congregation in Holy Church. Its purpose is to form zealous workers filled with the Spirit, that they might be fit instruments used by the Almighty Hand of God to sow virtue and root out vice in the people with the most potent weapon of the aforementioned Passion, whose very loving attraction even the hardest heart cannot resist.” (...)

“In every work they do, they are bound by the force of vow (understood according to the explanation given in the Rule, so as to remove every scruple and anxiety) to promote devotion to the Passion of Jesus Christ, by which we see marvelous conversions of sinners. Every evening after the mission sermon, they give the people a loving meditation on the Passion of Jesus for about half an hour. This meditation, falling like a soft, gentle rain on the terrified heart of the sinner, leads him to His God by loving attraction.”

From these texts we can clearly see that for Paul of the Cross the suffering of Christ possessed a loving attraction. He had recognised the Saviour’s love as the origin of His Passion for mankind and wanted to bring people into contact with this crucified love. He saw this as the most effective means of bringing about a basic reversal and renewal of human life.

With this focus on the Passion the new order challenged the spirit of those times, as Henri Daniel-Rops emphasises in his “Letter to a Passionist”:

“During the period known as ‘the century of enlightenment’, when the fundamental intellectual and moral crisis was in preparation that has set in motion a process whose effects we do not yet fully know nor have yet fully endured, St. Paul of the Cross, like St. Alphonsus Liguori, and like St. Louis Mary de Monfort a short while before them, appears to have been invested with the significance of a witness. He was the incarnation of the Christian denial, the Catholic denial of certain errors and certain compromises.”

Looking at our Founder and his loving connection with the Passion of Our Lord, the same author writes:

“Throughout his life he had his eyes fixed on a scene that we cannot bear to look at and that would, if we thought about it, take away even our desire to live. It is the spectacle of a man who is God, and infinite charity, and the overflowing of mercy, hanging on the wood of a gibbet and bleeding eternally from five wounds. It is said that when your founder evoked the Passion of Jesus he would suddenly stop speaking, and silent tears welled from his eyes. How often did not the prophetic words of the great Isaias come from his lips: ‘Surely he hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows’. Yes, this Saint, whose mission and message you want prolong, spent his life issuing this call to the Cross.”

3. The Letters

St Paul of the Cross was a master in spiritual direction. Through his popular missions and religious exercises he came into contact with large numbers of people from the different estates and social

classes. They confided in him their questions and problems, especially those relating to the spiritual life. As a means of communication in order to remain in contact with them over long distances, he made use of letters. Paul was an indefatigable letter writer. Over 2,000 letters written by him have survived to this day. Apart from their references to everyday things they repeatedly shed light on the fundamentals of his spiritual teachings and the depths of his mysticism of suffering.

As a man who had often spent his time in the vicinity of the sea, he used the sea for example as a symbol for the endlessness and breadth of God's love in His sufferings on behalf of mankind.

The following passages bear eloquent witness to this image:

"Lose yourself completely in that immense sea of love and swim right to its bottom where you will find another sea, that of the sufferings of Jesus and sorrows of Mary. This sea arises from the immense sea of God's love. Oh what a great reality this is!" (L. I, 280)

"Just as the passion of Jesus Christ is a work of the infinite love of God, so a soul completely lost in the sea of that love cannot help being immersed entirely in the sea of the most holy passion." (L. III, 336)

"I also want you to go fishing. How? Let me explain. The passion of Jesus is a sea of sorrows but it is also an ocean of love. Ask the Lord to teach you to fish in this ocean. Dive into its depths. No matter how deep you go, you will never reach the bottom. Allow yourself to be penetrated completely by love and sorrow. In this way you make the sufferings of Jesus your own. Fish for the pearls of the virtues of Jesus. This divine fishing trip is made without words. Faith and love will guide you. The humblest fisherman is the best". (L. III, 516)

From these few lines it is clear to what extent love represented for Paul the real access to the secret of the Passion. For him the memory of the suffering of Christ meant nothing other than to enter into the boundless sphere of the Love of God and to allow oneself to be transformed by this Love.

Conclusion

In his time the founder of the Passionists was a worthy successor to the great apostle Paul, who placed the "Word from the Cross" at the centre of his preaching.

Many people, however, have difficulty with this message. It sounds too negative. Critical questions can be heard: Should not the preaching of the Church be more life-affirming? But that is precisely what the "Gospel of the Passion" is about. It talks about life. Losing life in order to save life (see Luke 9, 23 - 24). That is the Christian paradox, the subject of so much controversy.

In St John's Gospel we read: *"God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, that everyone who has faith in him may not die, but that through him the world might be saved."* (John 3,16)

Jesus Christ faced human suffering in love and showed His solidarity with those who suffer, but He did not free us humans from suffering. Even after His resurrection, human suffering continues. It is an

inherent part of our human nature.

Christ did not free us from suffering, but through suffering. He consciously entered into this suffering and took it upon Himself, so that in future we are no longer alone in our suffering. This happened by virtue of the divine nature of the Son in Christ. A mere mortal would not have been able to achieve it.

Through His incarnation, God drew the suffering individual to Himself and united him or her with His divine nature. It was God's Passion for Man which made Him take upon himself the Passion of Man.

We can never fully comprehend what God did out of love for us. It is this precious love of our Saviour alone which can carry us through all our times of crisis, disintegration, disappointment and suffering. God accompanies us along all our ways and he is closest to us especially on the path of suffering. In His suffering we are redeemed. Obedience and love modelled on that of Christ will triumph over the suffering and take away its sting.

Since God entered into human suffering and has passed through it, suffering must no longer be experienced as something senseless. Rather, it now offers the opportunity for a deep communion with God through our participation in the suffering of Christ.

The life of suffering which Jesus Christ endured for us ended in the light of the Resurrection morning. Since then, those who are united with Him in suffering may hope that they will also be united with Him in glory.

"All I care for is to know Christ, to experience the power of his resurrection, and to share his sufferings, in growing conformity with his death; if only I may finally arrive at the resurrection from the dead." (Philippians 3, 10-11)

This secret of Easter should become the basic tenet of our lives.

God is the source of life. Everything that He performs is performed in the service of life. Jesus says: *"God is not God of the dead but of the living."* (Mark 12, 27)

And so the Passion of Jesus Christ was also a Passion for life. Through it, God wanted to serve the lives of men. In that life itself died our death, suffering and death no longer have the last word. His passionate love of mankind made Him take the suffering and death upon Himself, *"that men may have life, and may have it in all its fullness."* (John 10, 10)

The strongest motive for the spiritual life and apostolate of our founder Paul of the Cross was love. Love as the answer to the love of Jesus in His Passion! The love which strives to follow in the path of the crucified Christ in prayer and in the service of others as the way that leads to life.

No wonder His last words here on Earth were an exhortation to practise this love:

"Above all else I recommend the observance of that holy remembrance which Jesus Christ gave his disciples: "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another." My

dear brothers, that is what I long for with all the love in my poor heart, both for you who are present today and also for all the others who currently wear this habit of penance and mourning in memory of the suffering and death of our divine saviour, as well as all those who in future may be called by divine mercy to join this little flock of Jesus Christ.” (POR, 491)

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