

Circular Letter #2:

Holy Week and Easter 2019

Dear Mothers and Sisters in our Monastic Family,

As I sit down to write this letter, I have before me a new and ever-growing awareness not just of our various monasteries, but of the *individual* Nuns in our monasteries. Please know that each day I am spiritually present among you with prayer and sacrifice. Your witness to me is very strong, in the great variety of ways in which you are all participating in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus. As we approach Holy Week, I send each one of you my prayers that the sacred liturgies of Holy Week will be a profound renewal of your Passionist vocation as Nuns who are *“passionately”* in love with Him *“who loved us first”*¹ and laid down His life for us.

Holy Week and Eastertide offer us a graced time to contemplate and live with Jesus and Mary the fullness of this mystery. We, like a faithful bride who knows how to “read” the Heart of her Beloved, are called to linger over the mystery that unfolds in each of these precious days. What the entire Church does during Holy Week and Easter, we are called to do all year long, with the inner gaze of our hearts, ever contemplating the Face of the Bridegroom and responding with love, adoration, reparation, and sacrifice.

Beginning on Palm Sunday—the great portal into Holy Week—the Divine Office will place this antiphon on our lips: “Before the feast of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come; he had always loved those who were his own, and *now he would show them the depth of his love.*”²

Yes, during this holiest week of the liturgical year, Our Lord wants to show us personally “the depths of His love”. Yes, in this year 2019, He “eagerly desires to eat this Passover”³ with us and we with Him, that we may truly participate in His crucified love for the Father and for the salvation of the world.

In his own profound understanding of the Heart of Jesus, our holy founder, St. Paul of the Cross, wanted the daughters of the Passion to celebrate Holy Week in a deep spirit of prayer and recollection. For the brides of the Crucified, Holy Week can actually be a time of retreat in the interior cell of the heart, regardless of our external duties. In fact, it is very possible that with a little foresight and planning, the entire community can try to free up the days of the Triduum so that there is more time available to everyone to companion Our Lord and to contemplate His Face and the beauty of His Soul and Heart with the Mother of the Redeemer. In Mary, the Mother of

¹ cf Romans 5:8; 1 John 4:10.

² Midmorning antiphon during Holy Week, English translation.

³ Luke 22:15.

our Congregation, we find the “incomparable model”⁴ of gazing prayerfully upon the Face and Heart of Jesus in all of His sacred mysteries, particularly His Paschal Mystery.

The Necessary Path to a New Pentecost

The response to my first circular letter revealed something very encouraging: it showed that throughout our Monastic Congregation, there already is a great desire for a new Pentecost. This shows how even during these years of struggle and decline, the Holy Spirit is working to give us a shared vision.

In this second circular letter, I want to reflect with you about the ***necessary path*** toward this new Pentecost. We are not strangers to the truth that the ***journey toward Pentecost passes through death and resurrection***. We Passionist Nuns who are called to “unceasing contemplation of the Paschal Mystery of Jesus”⁵ are not unfamiliar with the necessity of undergoing our own allotted share (personally and communally) in the Passion and Death of Jesus if a new Pentecost is to happen within our Congregation. Yet at times it is so hard to recognize this “Paschal” action of God in the life of our community. It is so hard to become “obedient” to God’s will “unto death.” After Vatican II and the revision of our Constitutions, “we were hoping...”⁶ that there would be a new flood of candidates to our way of life, and “we were hoping” so much else. Yet in reality, it has turned out so differently for most of our monasteries.

It is necessary that we ponder the words of the unrecognized Risen Lord to the two discouraged disciples who were leaving the community of believers: “Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke! ***Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer...?***”⁷ Yes, for us humans, we ***are*** slow of heart to believe that ***the suffering of the cross must mark the progress of our Congregation at this moment of history. Our Congregation has come face to face with a radical call to become obedient even to death on a cross.***

Faced with new documents and new laws of the Church for cloistered Nuns, we can find ourselves wanting to run from this call to the cross of Jesus whose shadow is already upon us. We feel that the detachment asked of us by the Church is too much. Why can we not just stay in peace and leave everything just as it is? Yet in the truth of our hearts we know that “leaving everything as it is” is what we have been doing for decades, ***and it has resulted only in more and more decline.***

Our Holy Founder wrote in regard to the Passionist Nuns that he wanted to found “a community of truly holy souls, ***completely detached from the world....***” Each one needs to ask: What is the “world” that I personally need to be detached from? For some of us, the “world” can even be ***our own monastery.***

⁴ John Paul II: Rosarium Virginis Mariae #10.

⁵ Rule and Constitutions, Part II, #4.

⁶ Luke 24:21.

⁷ Luke 24:25-26.

The History of Passionists: an ongoing Paschal Mystery

We are certainly not the first Passionists that God has asked for such profound detachment and trust. It is good to review the history of the Passionist Congregation and our saints as well as the obituaries of Passionist men and women. In this history we see that **every generation** (and not just our own) had to undergo a special sharing in the Passion of Jesus: wars, illness, persecution, government confiscation of properties, etc.

An example I have often pondered is the life and death of Teresa Palozzi, one of the first Passionist Nuns. Remember how many long years she prayed and waited in hope for the foundation of the Corneto monastery? Finally, the happy day came on May 3, 1771, when she and Mother Mary Crucified and the other hand-picked Nuns entered the Monastery of the Presentation. ***Surely Teresa must have thought that there she would live, and there she would die.*** But we know what God asked of her at the end: their monastery was confiscated, and dear Teresa, now an old woman, died about six months later in the home of a benefactor. We can only guess the depths of union with Christ in detachment and self-emptying that the Holy Spirit wrought within her! I am sure that all of you could share many stories like this.

Recently, in reading the Lectio section of the Whitesville monastery's website, I was deeply struck by the reflections about the last days of Sr. Therese Marie Pritchard, who died during our January General Chapter. She who had been a nurse for most of her adult life, always taking care of others and rarely admitting her own neediness, in the end was emptied of everything. Here are excerpts from the blog:

During the community's weekly shared lectio divina, one Sister spoke about our recently departed Sr. Therese Marie. *"St. John Paul II once urged women religious to make each of their lives 'an original new edition of the Song of Songs,'" and the Whitesville Nuns had the privilege to see our Sister do just that. "While she underwent many sufferings throughout her life, these trials were but the 'desert' where her Bridegroom was slowly but surely purifying her from earthly attachments and teaching her to '[lean] upon her Lover' alone (Cant 8:5). During her last months on earth, Sister grew in joy and peacefulness, even as her failing health meant that she had to give up more and more of her own autonomy. Her gratitude, thoughtfulness, and love for Jesus Crucified were an incredible witness to all of us in community, as we watched in awe the work of the Divine Artist in her soul."*

This giving up of our own autonomy, be it personal or communal, is leaving a mark on our history, both for the male and female branches of the Passionist Congregation. We must decide how we will respond. This is a turning point in our history. These struggles to submit with free obedience to the new laws for cloistered Nuns is meant to be life-giving, and to be ***the travail (the birth pangs) of our giving birth to new generations of Passionist Nuns.*** How this will come about, we must leave to God, who is the One in charge.

In closing, I offer a prayer that together we will keep walking forward, “with our hearts set on the Paschal mysteries”, so that we may “be gladdened by their full effects” both personally and communally.⁸ The “full effects” of this mystical dying is of course a new mystical nativity, a being born anew in the life of the Holy Spirit of Jesus who keeps our charism young and alive and burning brightly. The “full effects” of the Paschal Mystery in other words, is the **new Pentecost we all desire!** With all this in mind, I wish each one of you a very graced Holy Week and all the joys of the Easter Season, in our Paschal Bridegroom.

Mother Catherine Marie CP

Mother President

⁸ Collect, Saturday Third Week of Lent.