

Circular Letter #7:

7th Circular Letter
Advent 2019

Dear Mothers and Sisters of our Passionist Family,

Greetings and prayers for a holy Advent filled with a deepened faith awareness of the very life of Christ that we bear within us. As I write, in my mind's eye, I am scanning the globe and taking every monastery and every member of your community into my heart and prayer.

First of all, I send you some precious words from the heart of our founder: ***“The time draws near when holy Church will celebrate the memory of the Divine Espousals of the Eternal Word to our human nature. Contemplate, O my daughter, the depths of this mystery of love, and let your soul be free to engulf and immerse itself in this boundless ocean of every good.”*** ~St. Paul of the Cross These “Divine Espousals” are meant for each one of us, and therefore, Advent is a tremendously important season for us as contemplatives, the spouses of the Word.

Our model for making a spiritually fruitful Advent is always the humble, prayerful Virgin of Nazareth, ***whose obedient “yes” to God changed the history of the world.*** Unknown to the world of her time, and hidden away in a village on the fringe of the Roman empire where she lived her simple, ordinary life, the Blessed Virgin Mary gave her total and unconditional “yes” to the Father’s loving plan of the redemption, made known to her by the Angel messenger. She said “yes” and “the Word of God dwelt among us!” The almighty Creator of the universe joyfully leaped from heaven to dwell within this humble Virgin’s womb. She was His first tabernacle.

The Virgin Mary pregnant with Jesus, the Redeemer of the world, becomes the model for Christians and especially for contemplatives who devote their entire lives to living hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3).

Being quietly present to this mystery of Christ dwelling and growing within us is a simple yet profound path to living Advent in a deepened spirit of prayer. No matter what we are doing throughout the day, Christ is living within us. No matter what sorrows or concerns burden our spirits, or pain we are carrying in our bodies, Christ is living through all of these experiences in and with us. We work, we pray, we recreate, we rest, and all the while we are “Christbearers” who carry hidden deep within us the life of Christ who by grace is growing more and more in our hearts. Being mindful of this great truth spontaneously draws our scattered minds and hearts into prayer. “The life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me,” says the Apostle Paul (Gal 2:20).

Every time we say “yes” to what God asks of us—trustfully surrendering to the Father’s plan-- there is a mystical nativity, and the life of Christ within us is increased. ***This ongoing mystical nativity is the key to the continual renewal of our personal and community lives. This is why our dear holy founder would say in some of his letters that he wished it to be Christmas in our hearts every day of the year.***

Just as during that first Advent, the hidden Jesus was growing in Mary’s womb, so too He wants to grow more and more in us, so that we ***become mature in the “full stature of Christ”*** spoken of in Ephesians 4:11-16. If we ***“live the truth in love”*** our Passionist Congregation will “grow in every way” more and more into Christ, in an ever-recurring mystical nativity that is the fruit of our daily mystical dying in order to embrace the Father’s will. Every time we say a trustful “yes” even to the painful and crucifying things the Father asks, every time we say “Fiat, let it be done to me as You wish!” the life of Christ increases within us, and we are growing to full maturity in Christ.

There is no need for me to write more, because you already know these marvelous truths. I do however, want to draw from these reflections some important connections that our entire Congregation would do well to ponder in prayer:

- *What would happen if every Passionist Nun across the globe used this season of Advent as the time to say a complete and unconditional “yes” to the Father’s plan made known to us by “a messenger,” that is, by the new laws contained in our General Statutes, in Cor Orans, Vultum Dei Quaerere, as well as the new document on formation, “The Art of Seeking the Face of God”?*
- *Mary’s “yes” changed the history of the world. Do we realize that our “yes” at this moment of history will change the history of the Passionist Nuns, as together, we strive to implement the plans laid out for us by the Church?*
- *And if Divine Providence has allowed us to be in a community that has lost its vital autonomy and if there is no reasonable way to revitalize our community, can we with Mary say “yes” to the Father’s plan for us, cooperating with the dignity of faith in carrying out the new laws of the Church?*
- *As we seek the Face of God and open our hearts sincerely before Him, what is the quality of our “yes” to His plan, His permissive will, His providence unfolding in our lives?*

Dear Mothers and Sisters, I feel moved to place these questions before our entire Congregation. Why? Because from my experiences during the past year, I understand clearly that if the Father’s plan for the Passionist Nuns is to be fulfilled, *we must all start taking honest and mature responsibility for our future, conscious that our new Congregation is fragile in many respects.* The work before us is too vast for only five people (the Mother President and her council). We all know that within our Congregation, there are a number of communities who have either lost their autonomy or have only a minimal autonomy. It is not enough for these communities to sit and wait for the Mother President and her General Council to visit and implement the new laws. We all have to think over our difficulties and then in the spirit of Mary’s beautiful “yes” to God, collaborate to find solutions.

Faith tells us we are all involved. It is not enough to read these documents once, close the book and go on with life as it has always been. *We cannot be like the foolish virgins of the Gospel parable who slept while their oil ran dry. No, the Church needs us to be wise virgins who are careful about the quality of their contemplative life; wise virgins who do what is necessary so their oil does not run dry; wise virgins who value the authenticity of a deep contemplative prayer life more than keeping buildings open.* These new laws and guidelines are about the *authenticity and quality of our contemplative prayer and life.* There is a beautiful plan of life contained in them, laying out the importance of the essential elements of authentic contemplative life. And there are also laws concerning autonomy, which especially in these first years of our Monastic Congregation, we must be concerned about.

If we use our faith, we *know* that these new guidelines and laws were not written capriciously. By faith we *know* that the Holy See is responding to a global emergency situation in cloisters. Therefore, our new structure of communion, our General Statutes and these new Church documents are offered as a mysterious (though painful) gift of the Father’s loving care for the Brides of His Divine Son at this difficult moment of our history.

My observation has been that when an elderly community is reduced to two, three, four or even five Nuns, the “oil” of the contemplative life does grow dim, just from the decreased energy of the Nuns, their health needs, the lack of time for personal study and ongoing community formation, and the pressures of keeping a large monastery going, etc. The prayer life suffers, much talking replaces quiet silence, vocal prayers are rattled off quickly, etc., and all in order to “keep everything going.” How this gradually developed is very understandable, but it is not the kind of contemplative life the Church wants. *Today, more than ever, the Church needs us to be who we say we are: contemplatives living in a deep prayerful union with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; contemplatives who by their ardent intercession and their liturgical prayer, are keeping the “heart” of the Church beating strongly.*

A recent Vatican document entitled “New Wine in New Wineskins,” helped me to understand our current situation. The document speaks of the urgent need to take a realistic look at our present situations.

It is not enough for us to focus on the mere survival of a community; rather, we must strive to become free enough to respond to the Holy Spirit's new promptings. But we can only find this freedom through detachment. "Some matters have become more and more complex and paralyzing for consecrated life and its institutions over time. The situation of accelerated change risks entangling the consecrated life, forcing it to get by on emergencies At times, it seems as though consecrated life is almost completely wrapped up in managing the day-to-day or in merely surviving. This way of facing reality is detrimental to a life that is full of meaning and capable of prophetic witness. The constant management of increasingly compelling emergencies consumes more energy than one might think." This can be found in #8 of the document.

It has been so edifying to me to witness several communities who have heroically "looked the truth in the eye" and admitted that their monastery's autonomy is fragile or even irreversible. As mature religious women, they are not pretending that everything is alright. They have measured themselves according to the Church's new norms for true autonomy and admitted truthfully that they are lacking. Then at great cost to themselves, they have opened themselves to be helped in accord with Cor Orans. ***This is the maturity that the Church needs of cloistered Passionist Nuns today, and that the Mother President and her council need if any progress is to be made at all.*** The Church needs more of these wise virgins who are not living in some kind of dream world, hoping that suddenly they will receive 8-10 young and holy vocations who will enable their community to regain its lost autonomy (which, if they all persevere, will take 9-10 years or more). Sisters, we know in our hearts that this is not going to happen.

In November, during our visitations in Spain, I was so edified by the open spirit of many of the Madrid and Bilbao Nuns. Particularly in Bilbao there was an open acknowledgement that they are few (six) and are all aging. Very recently, they lost Sr. Luisa, and now dear Sr. Paz has suffered a serious fall and has been hospitalized.

Many cloisters of Nuns today have very large monastic buildings, but often a handful of Nuns remain. And because the situation happened so gradually over the last 30 years, we no longer recognize that "stress" is our new "normal." We no longer realize that we are living from emergency to emergency, caring for our sick and elderly Nuns, attending to maintenance problems, doing the cooking, earning a living, etc. Doing in other words, all the things we were prayerfully able to do 30 and even 20 years ago when we had more members and the work was divided up more easily.

Even during our 2015 General Assembly, we learned that the Nuns of Belgium and Holland and also one monastery in France (Sables d'Olonne) had already moved together into assisted living facilities where their medical needs are properly cared for, and they are able to continue their Passionist life without worrying about keeping a monastery going. Other contemplative orders are doing the same. What will we Passionists do? I am speaking to those monasteries who have lost their autonomy, or have few members most of whom are of advanced age (75—100).

Our other monasteries who still have true autonomy need to thank God, but they too must strive to develop their contemplative lives according to the wonderful essential elements section of *Vultum Dei quaerere* and the Holy See's new document on formation. Hopefully in 2020—2021, we can begin to organize a commission to work on the topic of initial and ongoing formation according to the recently published document. In this letter, I have wanted to underline that authentic autonomy is something ***each community needs to be concerned about and to monitor.*** Even §123 in our 1979 Constitutions called each community to strive to "guarantee the vitality, development and future of the community."

Dear Mothers and Sisters, I realize this letter is long, but I felt it my duty to be forthright regarding these realities, so I beg you to ponder this in prayer. St. John Paul II once said that we have nothing to fear from the truth. That is true in our case. In all of this, God is very much at work. Jesus Himself told us in John 14:6: "***I am the way, the truth and the life.***" Together, let us "***live the truth in love***" (Eph 4:15), united with Mary's "Yes! Let it be done to me!" confident that new life will come forth for our own souls as well as for our entire Congregation.

***Come Lord Jesus! Come through the powerful intercession of the Mother of our Congregation!
Come and live in us more and more, with Your love for the Father and His Holy Will! May Jesus living
in Mary and living in us, bless us all with a holy Advent.***

My love, greetings and prayers to each one in your communities – ever in JXP,

Mother Catherine-Marie Schumann CP

Mother Catherine Marie, C.P.