

The dream of God in Saint Paul of the Cross

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In this presentation I was asked to reflect on: **The Dream of God in St Paul of the Cross**. As I reflected on the title, I was moved to delve into seeking some light in firstly understanding **what is the dream of God** - for the world, for humanity and for all creation. My inspiration came from the following text in John's gospel:

God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. (Jn. 3:16-17)

Thus, I believe one can rightly propose that the dream of God is **to save** all humanity. In fact, we can see this expressed clearly throughout the sacred Scriptures. It is there that we follow a course in salvation history; we come to understand God's saving activity in relationship with and in the history of God's people. Furthermore, in the covenant relationship of God with His people, we come to appreciate that God's salvation is founded on, and is a consequence of, **God's love**. This is no more



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clearly shown than in “the giving of his only-begotten Son”, Jesus, who is for us the human face of God.

This is why a foundational text for Passionists is the Christological hymn in the Letter to the Philippians 2:6-11 wherein is contained a core aspect of Passionist spirituality, that of ‘kenosis’ (self-giving, self-emptying): “he (Jesus) emptied himself...even to accepting death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7,8).

In his book **Jesus & Salvation**, Passionist Fr. Robin Ryan writes: “The saving act of Jesus is not accomplished **over against** God but is **from** God, the God who has made (and continues to make) the well-being of humanity God’s own deepest concern.”

In summary, we can say that the dream of God is to save humanity and creation because of God’s tremendous love which is shown in the self-gift of Jesus in his Passion and Death on the Cross. This dream of God always **was** in past times, **is** the same today, and **will be** forever. As such, it needs to be kept alive, remembered, and not forgotten. For this to happen, a mission of evangelization is required.

Perhaps the following story will help us to understand better the mission arising from God’s dream: After Jesus returned to heaven, he and the Archangels

Gabriel were talking. Even in heaven Jesus bore the marks of the crucifixion. Gabriel said, “Master, you must have suffered horribly! Do people know and appreciate how much you love them and what you did for them?”

Jesus replied, “Oh, no; not yet. Right now only a few people in Palestine know.”

Gabriel was perplexed: “Then what have you done to let everyone know about your love?”

Jesus answered, “I have asked Peter, Andrew, James, John, and a few more friends to tell others about me. Those who are told will tell others about me, and yet others still others until the last man and the last woman in the farthest corner of the earth will have heard the story of how I gave my life for them because I love them so much.”

Gabriel frowned and looked rather skeptical. “Yes, but what if Peter and the others grow weary? What if the people who come after them forget? Surely you have made other plans?”

Jesus said, “Gabriel, I haven’t made any other plans. I’m counting on them.”

This story reminds us that we all have the responsibility of not only sharing and partaking in the eternal graces arising from God’s dream, but also of remembering and promoting the divine salvific action. The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that “long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son...” (Heb. 1:1-2) – most especially in the saving act of his Passion, Death and Resurrection.

Over the centuries, many notable people carried out this evangelizing mission. In the world of 18th century Europe, a young man from northern Italy: **Paul Francis Danei (1694-1775)** – later to be known as **Paul of the Cross** – was ‘raised up’ by God to keep alive the memory of the Passion of Jesus as the greatest and most overwhelming work of God’s love – God’s saving act. This was the charismatic inspiration which led to Paul’s conversion and became his life-value which gave meaning, unity and thrust to everything he did and suffered. Speaking of the efficacy of the “memory” of the Passion of Jesus, Paul writes: “The most efficacious means for the conversion of sinners and for the sanctification of souls is the frequent remembrance of the Passion of



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Jesus Christ, from the forgetfulness of which proceed deplorable evils and disorders.” (1768 Account)

A deep forgetfulness of a loving God had become ordinary during the times in which Paul of the Cross lived. Paul himself describes it thus for us in his 1747 Account:

...at this pitiable and distressing time, 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.

To help this world to recover and re-awaken the “memory”, the “remembrance” of the saving Passion of Jesus, Paul is inspired “to gather companions”, with the intention (to which he later refers) of founding a new Congregation whose sole purpose was to promote the life-giving memory of the Pas-

sion of Jesus in the people of God. In his Account of 1768, he writes about the charismatic origin of the Congregation:

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 [] Passion, whose very loving attraction even the hardest heart cannot resist.

This was the dream of God in St Paul of the Cross: that there would be a group of missionaries (Passionists) who would offer the church and the world an effective contribution, by a contemplative-apostolic way of life centred on the *memory of the Passion of Jesus*. Passionists vow “to recall to mind with greater love the Passion of our Lord and to promote its memory by word and deed.”

As this Congregation commemorates the 300th anniversary of its foundation this year (22 November 2020), we are grateful for the graces of God working through the strengths and weaknesses, the opportunities and challenges of countless Passionists who have in the past, and who continue today, to give their lives as instruments through which God’s saving love is made efficacious and God’s dream is fulfilled.

We must remember that in God’s dream, St Paul of the Cross was chosen not only to found a congregation of men whose mission is “to preach the Gospel of the Passion by [their] life and apostolate” (Const. 2), but he was also called to found a congregation of women (Passionist Contemplative Nuns) whose mission is to receive, ponder and keep the Word of the Cross in their hearts as Mary did.

With the theme of this Jubilee being **Renewing Our Mission**, may we pray for and make time to discern our personal and communal renewal (conversion) so that God’s saving love expressed in the mystery of the Passion may be the light and the lens through which we see all of reality.

In a world forgetful of God’s gracious love, let us pray and work gently to direct the tide in the path of hope found in the wounds of Christ. As St Paul of the Cross said: “Wisdom comes from the wounds of Jesus; **the Passion contains everything.**”



Chapel of St. Paul of the Cross
in the Basilica of Sts. John and
Paul in Roma

