

“Veni Sancte Spiritus”

RENEWAL IN THE SPIRIT IN LIGHT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

~ A Pentecost Reflection ~



Circular Letter to the Passionist Family



WAITING: INSIGHTS FROM OUR COVID-19 CENACLE EXPERIENCE

The world of the Apostles, including Mary the mother of Jesus and a few others, was turned upside down ever since the arrest and death of Jesus ... and it would not be the same again - as they knew it. All this was because of their relationship to and connection with Jesus of Nazareth who, as they had lived through to see, suffered in the pursuit of his mission, was crucified, died and was buried, rose from the dead appearing alive in person to them, and ascended into heaven. However, before departing from their sight, Jesus asked them to **wait in Jerusalem** for “the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak; for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 1: 4-5).

The **time of waiting** and the Father’s promise to send the Spirit (the Advocate & Comforter) was fulfilled on the day of the Pentecost feast as they were gathered together in the Upper Room (the Cenacle) in Jerusalem. This was a life-changing moment for the Apostles; it was a moment of **conversion** and **transformation**: *from* a lack of confidence, fear and insecurity *to* freedom, courage and risk, driving them out boldly to bear witness to Christ and carry out God’s mission of justice, love and peace to the whole world. [You can read the account as described in Acts 2: 1-11.]

In this year of 2020 - the year in which we Passionists are commemorating the 300th anniversary of our Congregation’s foundation – we, too, are experiencing our life and our world being turned upside down due to the effects and influence of the Covid-19 pandemic. So much has happened which has been quite surreal. As if in a horror movie, an unknown virus has taken control of the whole of humanity leaving us humans powerless and cautious, at least until a vaccine can be found. Yet, somehow, all is not bad; because in the midst of this crisis, there have been hidden new and creative opportunities to discover!

Like the small community in Jerusalem, we, too, have had a **time of waiting** (alone or with others) **in our Cenacle**. Despite everything, this has been a precious time which has allowed us to contemplate life, faith, vocation, ministries, work, relationships, values, even death. In doing so, each one of us has had to come face-to-face with oneself. Freed from the busyness of activity and without the stress of having to produce and perform to distract us, we were confronted with the reality of what are the truly important elements in life, such as: faith and prayer, right relationships, respect and tolerance, generosity, selfless giving, empathy, compassion with and justice for the poor, ecological connectedness, concern for the environment of our





common home and for the common good, solidarity, peace, reconciliation, unity and communion.

Perhaps, we were also faced with some worrying and frightening prospects going forward, like the possibility of having to live life in a different way (less complex and more simple?) from that which we have become accustomed - especially with the threat of job losses, unemployment, business closures and financial stress which, in turn, can put strain on and expose families, communities and institutions to the risk of physical, social and economic vulnerabilities.

LOOKING BACK: RECOGNIZING THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Let us take time to look back and sift through the myriad of insights, thoughts and tugs that challenged and enlightened us during the lockdown in our ‘Upper Room’; and let us take the time to sit prayerfully with our experience. In doing so, perhaps, we will come to identify and recognize another alternative influence which has been impinging upon our lives, disturbing our thoughts and turning our world upside down. I contend it is the influence of the Holy Spirit descending upon us as ‘light’: enlightening us to see new possibilities for a different and richer future; and as ‘wind’: the ‘breath’ of God blowing away the ‘viruses’ which may have corrupted our being and breathing the new life of hope into us, enabling us to claim once again our createdness in God’s image and likeness.

This is the **NEW PENTECOST** – the gift of God’s Spirit blowing through the whole universe and hovering around wherever the Covid-19 is opening up paths of its influence. The Holy Spirit will not steer away from these paths without also influencing and enlightening hearts and minds to read the signs of the times. It is an opportunity which we must discern and seize, and not allow to pass by. This is a **‘kairos’ moment**, an opportune moment of grace: God’s invitation to personal and social conversion and transformation, to renewal and change.





Hopefully, as we begin to emerge out of the lockdown phase and find less restrictive measures in our living, we will not quickly dismiss or put aside the learnings gained from our enforced 'contemplative' life and 're-turn' to living life as we knew it before the pandemic. Rather, may we appreciate the silence and solitude during the waiting in our Cenacle and let us hold on to the learnings and inspirations we were gifted with in those insights which enlightened and challenged (even disturbed) our personal attitudes and social conscience to see more deeply a 're-newed' way of being and living.

While the Corona Virus certainly displayed its power and influence in our lives bringing the world to a standstill and claiming its victory, yet God has not abandoned us in this hopeless quest. Rather, God has sent the promised Holy Spirit – the Consoler - to sustain our hope by prodding us with his presence and inspiring us to courageously review our plans and projects in light of what is truly necessary for a better future and in accomplishing the mission of the kingdom of God.



***“Lord,
send out your Spirit,
and renew
the face of the earth.”***

LOOKING FORWARD:

WITNESSES ON THE JOURNEY OF MISSION RENEWAL

We remember that the Pentecost event was a dynamic one. From a passive waiting, the community in the Upper Room were gifted, enlightened and sent out as renewed witnesses and missionaries *“in the power of the Spirit”*. Just as Jesus began his ministry in Galilee *“in the power of the Spirit”* (Lk. 4:14), Jesus promised his disciples before his Ascension: *“you will receive the power of the Holy Spirit which will come on you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to earth’s remotest end.”* (Acts 1: 8)

Inspired by the experience forced upon us by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, I hope that this memorable Pentecost will find us Passionists not waiting passively, but actively seeking the grace of renewal for ourselves and our mission. As a Congregation, we have been on a journey of **Renewing Our Mission** since the 47th General Chapter of 2018 – with the awareness that this necessarily implies **renewing ourselves**. The renewal of the mission is a natural consequence of the renewal of the witnesses and



missionaries. In this context, I repeat what I said during the 47th General Chapter. For us Passionists:

*...our mission is integrally connected with our life in community...Our life is our mission (by witness), and our mission is our life (by action). Together, they both shape us and give us our identity and authenticity as Passionists. **Who we are** and **what we do** are interconnected and interrelated.*

The journey is in process, particularly as we commemorate in this year the 300th jubilee of the foundation of our Congregation and look to the future with **gratitude, prophecy** and **hope**.

Just as we must not lose, but find the opportunities and challenges hidden in the experience of Covid-19 life, so also, I hope that we will not forget the learnings arising from the 47th General Chapter. Yes, it is true that there were many limitations in the Chapter and, perhaps, not everyone's expectations were fulfilled. But, nevertheless, it was a gathering of the capitulars representing the Congregation who were summoned together to listen and to share with one another about issues concerning our life and mission in the presence of the Holy Spirit who was invoked: "*Veni Creator Spiritus*".

For me, one moment of the Chapter that was Spirit-inspired, which was applauded at the time, and which has since been relegated to nice memory, was when the capitulars were invited to share in an impromptu manner what was in their minds and hearts – their/our passion! As I did when I closed the General Chapter, I would like to recall for you some of the **prophetic** words and phrases that I remember from that session which I hope the Pentecost fire will rekindle in us once again so that our passion may be kept alive as we continue to discern the renewing of our mission in these present times. This can be most effectively discerned, decided, lived and witnessed in the local community level.

Following are some of the prophetic words/phrases expressed - with my commentary and questions for consideration:

✚ "*We want to be welcoming, hospitable communities, schools of prayer.*"

How are you, with your community of brothers and sisters going to make this effective and real?

What does it mean for our communities to be 'schools of prayer'?

Can we perhaps think of every community, every house being a 'Shrine' to the Passion of Jesus? A place where people feel welcome and hospitality, a space where they truly experience and encounter the presence of Love which comes from the Passion of Jesus?



- ✚ *“We want to go to the peripheries, to the margins, to the places where no one wants to go.”*

How do you understand this desire? And how can we translate it into a practical reality?

What is the charism asking of us? The charism is the gift of the Spirit, the grace of God for the good of the church community, for making God’s kingdom come.

In his address during the audience, Pope Francis spoke prophetic words to us. He challenged us to *“a creative fidelity to the charism.”*

The charism is not something which is limited and protected, contained in a box. It is the life-giving force of the Spirit and blows where it wills. We must not control it, but listen to the Spirit.

- ✚ *“We need to listen to the signs of the times”.*

This phrase was repeated so many times during the Chapter – including in Pope Francis’ address to us.

Listening with the eyes of faith is a key element of prayerful discernment.

How do we listen to the signs of the times and discern a response with creative fidelity to our charism? Contemplation and ‘seeing deeper’ of what is happening in our world, in our church, in our history and attention to the ‘prodding’ of the Holy Spirit to reflect and act in light of the Gospel of the Passion.

We need to have courage. We need to be bold. We need to take risks in faith and trust - even if it doesn’t work out.

A NEW PENTECOST: THE JOURNEY GOES ON

As we celebrate this Pentecost in what has been quite unprecedented times in history due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and as we commemorate 300 years of the foundation of our Congregation by St. Paul of the Cross, let us take time to recall and appreciate with a great sense of gratitude in the past, and with hope now and in the future of God’s accompanying presence in the power of the Spirit.

This is another opportunity for us to stand ready to be renewed by the Pentecost flame so as to be prophetic witnesses and missionaries of Christ in our daily living. Our openness to the grace of ongoing conversion – a **‘re-turning’** to Christ and the Gospel way is key.





“Come, Holy Spirit! Enlighten us with the gift of prophecy for our times.” Let us pray for courage and boldness to break out in mission and not be imprisoned and paralyzed by our fears which keeps us locked up and bound within safe limits. Prophecy demands that we can break out and be freed to speak and witness **for God, and with God, and in God.**

O breathe on me, O breath of God,
Fill me with life anew
That I may love the things you love,
And do what you would do.

O breathe on me, O breath of God,
My will to yours incline,
Until this earthly part of me
Glow with your fire divine.

O breathe on me, O breath of God,
Until my heart is pure;
Until my will is one with yours,
To do and to endure.

O breathe on me, O breath of God,
So shall I never die,
But live with you the perfect life
Of your eternity.

Edwin Hatch (1835 – 1889)

Feast of Pentecost
31 May 2020

Retreat of SS. Giovanni e Paolo
Rome



Fr. Joachim Rego C.P.
Superior General

