

ENCOURAGEMENT IN TRYING TIMES

Letter from Superior General to the Passionist Family

Dear Brothers, Sisters and Friends in the Passionist Family,

Despite all the best human expertise and efforts being called upon to unite in the fight against the global pandemic of Covid-19, the virus continues to threaten and refuses to loosen its grip on the world's humanity. While we have coped with the imposition of very painful restrictions which deprived us of some natural freedoms while proving effective in the fight, yet we continue to be warned by the World Health Organization (WHO) that the pandemic is far from over. In effect, in areas where restrictions were eased and our impatience to return to "life as normal" and a sense of complacency set in, a "second wave" of the virus has reared its ugly head.



While continuing to do all that is humanly possible and complying with the necessary restrictions to contain the spread of the virus, we must fight against the scourge of 'discouragement' and be encouraged by the virtue of HOPE. Today, we commemorate the feast of Our Lady of Holy Hope. She is an example and model to us of perseverance in the face of great struggles and hopelessness in life and one who continually points us to her Son Jesus as the bringer of Hope.

The Sacred Scriptures – "Word of God in words of men" – is a source of Hope. They weave for us a beautiful panorama of the story of God's salvation and God's covenant with His people – all of which communicates God's love and care for us. The stories and accounts speak to us of creation and newness, sacrifice and promise, dignity and wonder, protection and security, healing and renewing, encouragement and comfort, new life and hope. As we read and ponder the

Scripture accounts, we are asked **to remember...to not forget**, because in remembering we **re-live our own experience of God's saving love**.

As the People of God, we are a **people of the 'Memory'**; not to mention that, as Passionists, this is precisely what we are called to do: "**to keep alive the memory**" - but 'memory' as understood by the Jewish people. In the Jewish mind, memory was not just a recalling to mind what happened in the past as objective facts; rather, they actualized memory by a symbolic re-enactment of a historical moment by which there is a fusion of past and present. The past is very much alive in the present and we see the past through the prism of faith. We do not just commemorate or recount; rather, we remember (re-live) the saving love of God. So, memory is a part of me, a subjective experience...a re-living of my story. Memory defines us and gives meaning to our lives.

As we live through this difficult, fearful and uncertain experience in these times with the Covid-19 which is dictating our lives and holding us to ransom, we are in uncharted waters. For many of us it is an experience which is unprecedented, nothing like what we have ever known before. Many people are suffering physically through illness due to this virus; many others are struck down economically because of the loss of jobs and businesses; others are affected emotionally by the isolation and social distancing measures; others again are struggling mentally because of fear and anxiety of an uncertain future; and, as we know, thousands have, and continue to succumbed to the virus in death.

How about you and I? What is it that is holding you up from 'drowning'? How are you living the sense of uncertainty of the future? To whom or to what are you turning in order to find some light and comfort in the present situation? How and in what way is your prayer life and liturgical actions giving meaning in this situation and strengthening you to keep going? What is it that is sustaining you? On what are you living?

Personally, I am living on HOPE – a hope founded in my faith of a God who saves; a hope which beckons me **to not forget**, but **to keep alive the memory**



of the past, so as to live in the present with a key to the future, confident that the storm will pass and the sun will rise again. The Jewish mystic and healer, Rabbi Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760) (who lived in the time of our Holy Founder) said: "*In memory lies the secret of redemption.*"

Another well-known Holocaust survivor and author, Elie Wiesel (1928-2016) says: *"Without memory, our existence would be barren and opaque, like a prison cell into which no light penetrates; like a tomb which rejects the living....it is memory that will save humanity. For me, hope without memory is like memory without hope."*

Let us look to JESUS: the **Light of Hope**. Jesus is the Light of Hope, because he lived on HOPE. As a Jew, Jesus, too, was a man of the 'memory'. During his darkest hours when all seemed hopeless, in his abandonment which left him frightened and alone, and in the silence and seeming absence of God which perhaps made him doubt and question the Father's love, Jesus **did not forget**; he **kept alive the memory**; he remembered the history of God's saving love and the promise of God's faithful covenant with His people. Jesus' hope sustained him.



These challenging times call us **to remember** and **to live on HOPE**. St Paul assures us that *"hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us."* (Rom. 5:5)

The Covid-19 pandemic is certainly testing our HOPE. In many ways it is the like the tomb in which we are kept bound and constricted; yet it is necessary that we **be there** to confront death and look beyond for the life-giving opportunities...always remembering the saving power of God who loves His people.

Take time to reflect on the experience of *"Mary Magdalene and the other Mary"* going into the tomb where the body of Jesus lay (Matthew 28:1-10). It was a transforming experience. What should be a place of darkness and death was actually bathe in light and there was no dead body of their friend Jesus.



Instead, in the empty tomb they met the presence of God's angel with the consoling message of hope: *"Do not be afraid; he is not here; he is risen...Go and tell the brothers to meet Jesus in Galilee."* Galilee is the place of the original call of the disciples. It is from 'our Galilee' that there will be a new beginning and promise of new life.

Dear brothers and sisters: allow your faith, hope and love to lead and guide you in these times. Be witnesses and messengers of hope and practical charity to all who are struggling physically, mentally and spiritually. Accompany one another with the faith and courage to **remember** that God is bigger than any problem that could arise. **Keep alive the memory of the Passion as the greatest and most overwhelming work of God's love.** – St. Paul of the Cross



OFTEN WHAT BLOCKS HOPE IS THE STONE OF DISCOURAGEMENT. ONCE WE START THINKING THAT EVERYTHING IS GOING BADLY AND THAT THINGS CAN'T GET WORSE, WE LOSE HEART AND COME TO BELIEVE THAT DEATH IS STRONGER THAN LIFE. WE BECOME CYNICAL, NEGATIVE AND DESPONDENT. STONE UPON STONE, WE BUILD WITHIN OURSELVES A MONUMENT TO OUR OWN DISSATISFACTION: THE SEPULCHER OF HOPE. LIFE BECOMES A SUCCESSION OF COMPLAINTS AND WE GROW SICK IN SPIRIT. A KIND OF TOMB PSYCHOLOGY TAKES OVER: EVERYTHING ENDS THERE, WITH NO HOPE OF EMERGING ALIVE. BUT AT THAT MOMENT, WE HEAR ONCE MORE THE INSISTENT QUESTION OF EASTER: WHY DO YOU SEEK THE LIVING AMONG THE DEAD? THE LORD IS NOT TO BE FOUND IN RESIGNATION. HE IS RISEN; HE IS NOT THERE. DON'T SEEK HIM WHERE YOU WILL NEVER FIND HIM: HE IS NOT THE GOD OF THE DEAD BUT OF THE LIVING (CF. MK 22:32). DO NOT BURY HOPE!

~ Pope Francis


~ Fr. Joachim Rego, C.P.
Superior General

Retreat of SS. Giovanni e Paolo, Rome
Feast of Our Lady of Holy Hope
09 July 2020