

Spirituality and Passionist Life

Fr. Bernard Mayele Muntwene, C.P.

Jubilaeum



Lived with zeal and enthusiasm

It is not easy to define the term *spirituality*, much less to specify its content. It comes from the Latin word *spiritualitas*, and concerns the perfection of life according to God, supernatural life, life in the light of faith and in opposition to existence without grace.¹ There is no theory of spirituality in the Bible, but its contents are found especially in Paul's letters. In fact, we frequently find the invitation to live as spiritual people (1 Cor.2:13; Gal.6:1; Rm.8:9), to live in holiness moving toward perfection: spirit, soul, and body (1Thess.5:23). With this exhortation Paul sums up the Christian's way of life, under-

¹— Cf. LUCIEN-MARIE., École de spiritualité, in Dictionnaire de Spiritualité IV, 116-128; R. BLATNICKY, Il concetto di «scuola di spiritualità», in Rivista di pedagogia e scienze religiose 4 (1967), 48-198.



stood as a life ruled by the Spirit of the Risen Lord (Rm.8).

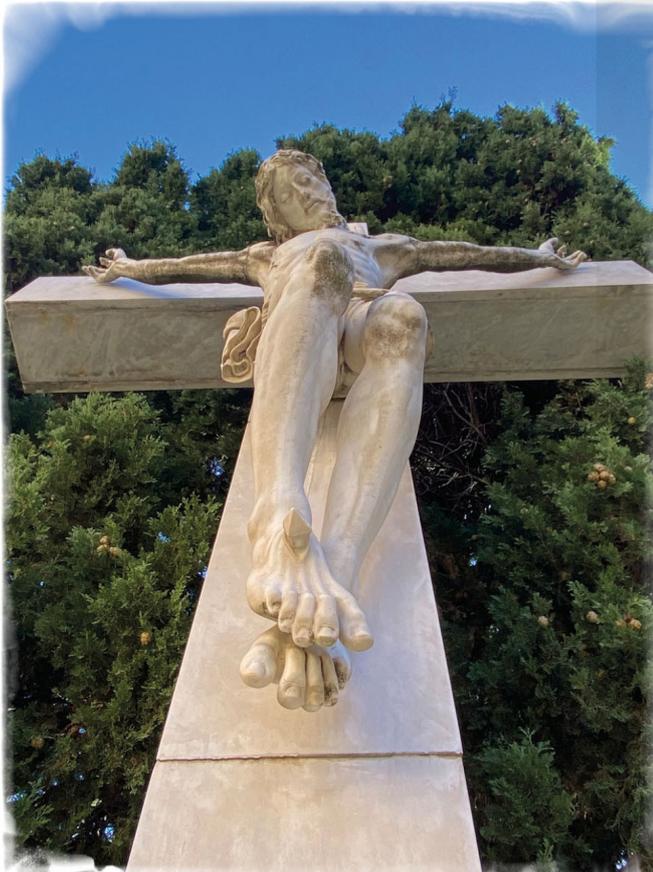
Therefore, to speak about spirituality or spiritual experiences, about the spiritual life, of the paths of the Spirit, or of walking toward holiness and perfection, are all expressions that are used in this area. It means talking about Christian life that develops, consolidates, and matures.² Since the Holy Spirit guides individuals differently toward perfection, the saints differ from each other. Consequently, there are different styles of Christian spirituality: Ignatian spirituality, Franciscan spirituality, Carmelite spirituality, Passionist spirituality, etc. These spiritualities come into existence as a response to the needs of the Church at a particular point in time.

The spirituality of the Passion or Passionist Spirituality.³

This combination of words requires clarification. Passionist spirituality is the personal spiritual ex-

2 Cf. D. SORRENTINO, *L'esperienza di Dio. Disegno di teologia spirituale*, Cittadella, Assisi, 2007.

3 Cf. P. BASILIO, *La spiritualità della Passione nel Magistero di San Paolo della Croce*, Madrid, 1961.



perience of St. Paul of the Cross shared with other members of the same spiritual family. Antonio María Artola says-- "Passionist spirituality is the series of spiritual characteristics of the Congregation founded by St. Paul of the Cross."⁴ It is a very concrete and simple proposal for living evangelical life, recognized by the Church as a valid form of Christian life and evangelization. "The spirituality of the Passion, on the other hand, is a much broader and more generic reality, designating all forms - people and institutions - that give a prominent place to the mystery of the Passion of Jesus."⁵

The Origins of Passionist spirituality

In his book on passiology⁶, Father Artola points out that the interest in the study of Passionist spirituality dates back as early as 1805 with St. Vincent Mary Strambi, the first biographer of St. Paul of the Cross in his work, *"The treasures we have in Jesus Christ"*⁷. In this regard the then Superior General, Fr. Leo Kierkels, in 1928, in a circular letter proposed an update for the scientific study of the history of the spirituality of St. Paul of the Cross in French. Fr. Gaétan of the Name of Mary (Henry H. Reijnders) was the first to develop a new methodology, composing a critical work on Passionist spirituality. He was also the first to attempt to rework the spiritual doctrine of the St. Paul of the Cross. His works have contributed much to creating the image of St. Paul of the Cross as a mystic and have inspired other researchers, among them Frs. Costante Broveto,⁸ Stefano Pompilio,⁹ and Enrico Zoffoli¹⁰ in Italy, and others in various nations, to study Passionist spirituality. It is important to point out that in addition to these pioneers there are also many other scholars and authors of Passionist spirituality.¹¹

4- A.M. ARTOLA, *La Passiologia, Teologia spirituale della Congregazione passionista*, Roma, Curia Generalizia, 2013, 45.

5- A. M. ARTOLA, *La passiologia*, 45.

6- *Passiologia* deriva da *Passio*: sofferenza e logos: trattato. La passiologia allora si può definire come scienza delle sofferenze di Cristo. 60.

7- A.M. ARTOLA, *La Passiologia, Teologia e spiritualità della Congregazione passionista*, 15.

8- C. BROVETTO., *Introduzione alla spiritualità di S. Paolo della Croce. Morte mistica e divina natività*, Eco, S. Gabriele (TE), 1955.

9- S. POMPILIO, *L'esperienza mistica della Passione in San Paolo della Croce*, Roma, 1973.

10- E. Zoffoli, *San Paolo della Croce, storia critica*, I, II, III, 1963-1968

11- A.M. ARTOLA, *La Passiologia, Teologia spirituale della Congregazione passionista*, 56. Per uno studio più approfondito della cultura e spiritualità passionista si consiglia di leggere la rivista *Sapienza della Croce*.





Passionist spirituality is centered on the Passion of Jesus

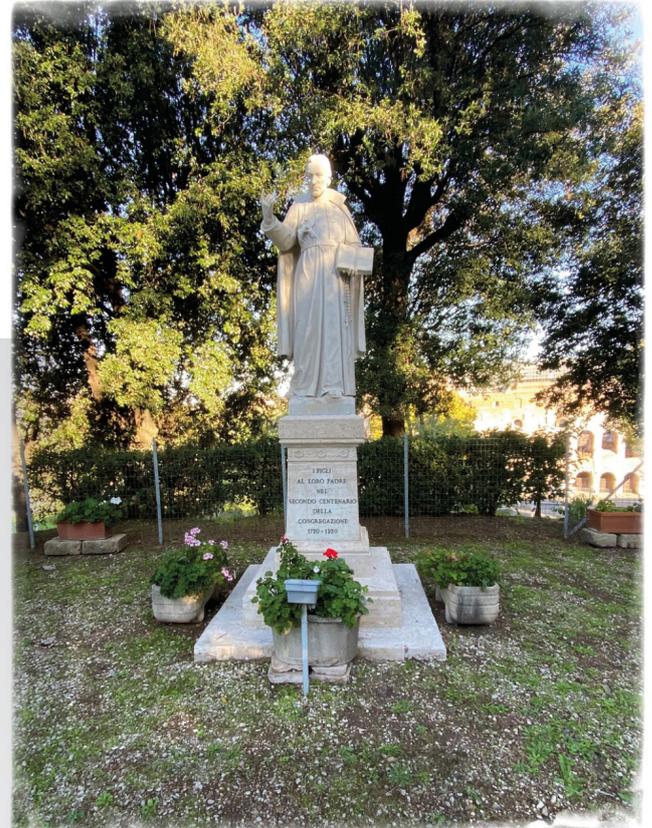
To truly understand Passionist spirituality, as taught by St Paul of the Cross, one must start from the fact that the Passion of Jesus was the center of his life, his teaching and his apostolate. The originality of St. Paul of the Cross lies in having perceived the Passion of Jesus as the principal means of achieving salvation and holiness. Many saints spoke about Jesus Crucified, but no one before him said so forcefully that placing Jesus Crucified at the center of one's spiritual journey implies not only knowledge of Him but also conforming one's life to his.¹² Passionist spirituality is centered on the mystery of the Passion and death of Jesus understood as the supreme manifestation of God's infinite love for humanity. The Passionists commit themselves by a fourth vow to the propagation of devotion to this mystery.¹³

The proclamation of the Passion provoked a major social and spiritual change at the time of Paul of the Cross-- a change of mindset, of sensitivity. The diffusion of meditation on Jesus' Passion enlightened human crosses and made possible the profound change of the "Tuscan marshlands" through the humble presence of Passionist missionaries. St. Paul of the Cross founded his retreats in places where people were most abandoned and in material and spiritual difficulty.¹⁴ Priests and their parishes were helped to renew themselves first, and then entire populations, especially the poorest, the most abandoned, and those rejected by society.

The status of Passionist spirituality

Paul of the Cross, a man of God, an apostle of the Passion, a teacher of prayer, can still be considered a model to imitate. With his zeal for the faith he awakened the conscience of the people of his time. Paul of the Cross's response to the evils of his time was the preaching of God's love revealed in the Passion of his Son, Jesus, as a safeguard for the faith and Christian tradition.

He argued that a spiritual revolution should start from within the Church, that is, from priests, because they have received a great gift, the responsibility for service in the Church. In every historical



period, from the time of the Founder to the present day, the Passionists have zealously lived their charism -- all the way to Africa's wounded and suffering land. They proclaimed the love of God revealed in Jesus' Cross to give hope to all people. In short, the Passionist vocation consists in announcing the Gospel of the Passion with our life and our apostolate,¹⁵ and teaching others to meditate on it so that they can become imitators of Christ and share in his suffering and glory.¹⁶ Today compared with the time of the Founder, the variety of apostolates have expanded in different areas and for different audiences-- we minister in parishes, we engage in social experiences, we are open to missions "ad Gentes", we are present in the world of culture, of the media. However, popular missions, the preaching of spiritual exercises, and spiritual direction remain the main and central activities of the Passionists¹⁷.

12— Cf. Max ANSELM, *Lettere ai laici*, Vol I-I, 62.

13— C. BROVETTO, *Spiritualità di San Paolo della Croce e la nostra spiritualità passionista contenuta nel voto specifico*, Ricerche di storia e spiritualità passionista, 23, Roma, 1982.

14— Cf. M. ANSELM, *Lettere ai laici*, Vol. II, 62.

15— Cf. Rule and Const., 2.

16— Rule and Const., 3.

17— Cf. Rule and Const., 70