

REFLECTIONS ON PASSIONIST FORMATION

AUTUMN 2020

The major issues confronting humanity are also the issues calling for a creative response from the Church in general and from religious in particular. The worldwide Covid 19 pandemic has brought death, suffering, and hardship to millions of people and continues to pose an enormous threat to human life and people's livelihoods. It has disrupted every aspect of normal life including the plans to celebrate the Jubilee. The course for Passionist formators planned for November 2020 has had to be postponed until November 2021. This is the background against which I offer these reflections on Passionist Formation at the end of 2020.

The international response to the pandemic has exposed a world deeply divided ideologically as well as in many other ways. In some cases, politicians allowed selfish economic interests to prevail over the value of human life and the health of people. In most countries, it was the economically poor who suffered the worst consequences of the pandemic. Poor people and people of color continue to be the most disadvantaged citizens who bear the brunt of national and international crises. The same narrow economic interests also shape the inadequate responses to the climate crisis and the dangers threatening life on earth.

FORMATION IN CONTEXT

Besides the pandemic, we are also living through a period of social, political, economic and religious unease and upheaval. In order to respond creatively and effectively to the changed situation we find ourselves in, we need to understand what is happening and why.

Within the Passionist Congregation, we feel the effects of these changes most keenly in the decreasing number of vocations in many places and the difficulty in finding new and effective ways of communicating the Gospel of the Passion. The entire world of communications has undergone an extraordinary transformation. Communication today for most people means spending a lot of time on their phones, iPads, and computers accessing news, contacting friends,

and gathering information. The place of public speaking and preaching in today's world is undergoing a revolutionary change. Our traditional area of "expertise" was classical preaching to a congregation of the faithful, gathered in churches for that purpose. This form of communication is now considered the least satisfactory and the least effective. We are still struggling to come to terms with the digital revolution.

The Passionists are affected by what is happening in the wider Church community. For most of the last three hundred years, the settled world of the rural parish was the normal setting for living the Catholic faith and hearing the preaching of the Gospel. The message of the Passionist missionaries entered the settled life of the rural parish as an injection of new energy and fervor. It gave a lift to the daily living of Catholic life and the weekly Mass. Its effectiveness was precisely that it could take for granted the already well-established life of the rural parish and all its elements. This is no longer the setting for the vast majority of people including Catholics. More than 85% of the world's population now lives in sprawling urban areas. Today, the Gospel has to be preached to urban dwellers who no longer experience the clear identity and close ties of the rural parish. We have entered an unsettled era that has been characterized as "liquid".

The move away from the rural setting of Church life to the cities has other consequences. City life creates a new sense of what it means to be human. New experiences and new expectations affect how young people relate to their parents and families; the access to education and mixing with a huge variety of people inspires new dreams and hopes, and changes how they relate to the world and absorb information. People today, and young people in particular, have a more critical and questioning attitude to everything. Tradition and authority no longer carry the weight or influence they had just a few years ago. People will not simply accept religious beliefs and practices because that has always been the way. This is not an expression of human pride or disobedience. This is a new way of being a mature, adult human being. Young people are being educated to think for themselves, to question in order to understand, and to cultivate an appropriate sense of autonomy. This is not individualism or relativism. It is the recognition and celebration of the proper dignity of rational and free human persons created by God. Even the

Church has to recognize the new requirements that follow from recognizing and respecting human dignity and freedom, including the freedom to question.

ADAPTING TO THE NEW CONTEXT

One of the major reasons for the failure of religious to experience the kind of renewal hoped for after Vatican II is that they generally failed to appreciate the depth and extent of the changes in society, and in people's way of thinking and relating to the Church. In fact, it was common for both clergy and religious to lament these changes and ascribe them to negative forces like materialism, secularism etc. Many religious took the view that the forces of change should be condemned together with the changes they brought. This was a tragic misreading of the situation. It was a return to the old mentality of "contra mundum" when what was needed was a deeper understanding of the real, inevitable and positive changes that were occurring in society and in individuals. This is not to ignore the more negative consequences of rapid urbanization and social change on persons and family life. However, in general, it can be said that an educated, critical people looked for a mature, intelligent and credible Church. Unfortunately, the Church in practice was not always able to rise to the level of the renewed Church envisioned by Vatican II. As a result, many good people became disillusioned.

The pressing issues of a ravaged planet earth, of economic injustice, political domination, and interreligious conflict were noted in Church documents but left largely untouched. A few minor adaptations were made to some external forms but there was no in-depth look at the needs of urban dwellers living in an increasingly cosmopolitan and pluralistic world. The Church, including religious, continued to think and act in narrow and tribalistic ways. The results are evident. Many people walked away. The Church that had attracted the people in the rural setting of the past, that had nourished and inspired them, was not up to the task of attracting, nourishing and sustaining the people in the new urban setting. In many instances, the Church authorities blamed the people, liberal theology and the evils of society for all of this. This reaction was just another sign of the inability and unwillingness of the Church to learn. It was a failure to see that the Church as a living organism had to change and adapt to survive.

THE NEED FOR CREATIVITY

How can the Church operate creatively and effectively in these new circumstances? So far, it has been very difficult for the Catholic Church to move away from the old authoritarian and clerical style that characterized Catholic life in rural parishes. The older forms of hierarchical structure and authoritarianism die hard, and new forms of participation and mutuality require a new set of human qualities that need to be learned. This is what is required but the Church is slow to adapt in practice. A new generation of clergy has arrived that resists this move. They are attracted to the hierarchical and authoritarian style that gives them status and power over the people.

In order to respond to the new situation with creativity and energy, Passionists need a deeper understanding of what has been happening in the world, in the Church and in the congregation during the last few decades. We must try to avoid simplistic explanations that try to identify the “enemy” that brought this trouble upon us. We are living through a time of unprecedented change that is affecting every dimension of life on earth. Religious must resist the temptation to retreat from the challenges by trying to create an illusory replica of a more comforting past. The past belongs in the past. Our life is here and now, together with our brothers and sisters who are living, struggling and suffering today. Our religious life is a response to the call of Jesus to be his disciples in this new context.

It is also essential for religious to have a new inspiring ideal that will inform and give direction to religious life for the future. The biblical image of the desert has had an overwhelming influence on every form of religious life beginning with Anthony the Great who withdrew to the desert of Egypt in the third century. The image of the desert insists on the need to withdraw, to separate from the rest of the Christian community and live a cloistered life away from the “world”. However, there are other biblical images that can inspire a different approach to religious life. Religious can be the “leaven”, or the “light of the world”, the “salt of the earth”. These images call for a way of life and mission that is immersed in the world, engaged with people, helping them with their burdens and suffering. This kind of life has more in common with the life of Jesus who went among the people proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and comforting the afflicted.

For a long time the focus of our mission was to “save souls” and help people to “go to heaven” when they die. Our preaching and celebration of the sacraments, as well as the various devotions and visits to shrines were directed at the salvation of souls. In Jesus's missionary “manifesto” (Luke 4,18ff), there is no mention of “souls” or of “going to heaven”. Jesus teaches us to save our life by losing it in the service of others; it is by turning our attention away from ourselves, and acting together for the good of our neighbor that we save our lives. Jesus insists it is those who forget themselves in order to clothe the naked, to visit the sick, to alleviate the misery of the poor, to help to lift the burdens from those who are crushed and bent over who will enter the kingdom of God.

A renewed religious life will be inspired by the Gospel images of leaven, light and salt. Religious will be fully engaged in the world, close to people, sharing the Good News of the love and mercy of God, helping to carry the burdens of people, and in all things anticipating the arrival of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

The ideal of community life is still a major factor in attracting new members. Unfortunately, it is the absence of community life that is the reason given by many who decide to leave the religious life. Religious can still witness to the values of community by being close to people and inviting them to share their life of prayer and mission. Religious communities are no longer self-contained and isolated from the wider community. In the often harsh and anonymous setting of modern urban life, the religious community can offer a haven of warmth and acceptance to those who are confused and searching for meaning. Religious today are called to a new form of insertion among the people of the parish that includes a strong spirit of openness and hospitality. This is not exclusively a form of “socializing”, but a form of real Christian fraternity, based on the Gospel and expressed in prayer and mission together.

A NEW FORM OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

“Go out to the whole world . . .”(Mark 16, 15) is the mandate of Jesus to his disciples. Religious respond to this mandate in a particularly intense and radical way. Religious can contribute to the future of the Church and of the world by a renewed commitment to the call to

live in intimacy with Jesus and to proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom.

The ideal of religious life continues to inspire men and women to dedicate themselves to Jesus and the Gospel for the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God. Religious communities witness to the Gospel values that offer hope of a better future for people and for the planet. International and multi-ethnic religious communities help foster greater understanding and acceptance of minorities and people of other cultures and religions. Religious forge bonds of friendship with people of other religions and none to work together for the good of all people, and a new appreciation of all God's creatures and the health of the planet. They preach the Gospel of life and joy that embraces all people. They nourish the Christian faithful and open them to welcome people of other nationalities, cultures and faiths.

Jesus calls all men and women his brothers and sisters. This was central to the revolutionary message preached by St. Paul and the early Church. This is the truth that can save the world from future suffering. Religious play a major role in spreading the Good News that humanity is one family and that all people are the beloved children of God and brothers and sisters to one another. The poorest, the weakest, the most neglected people will be the particular concern of religious in all they do. This is the Good News for today; it is the new morality and the new direction suggested by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si* and *Fratelli Tutti*; it is the vision that is revitalizing the religious life in the Church.

A RENEWED FORMATION

Formation within the religious life is a lifelong process that begins with initial formation and continues until we see God face-to-face and experience the fullness of life in the Kingdom of God. A fruitful formation presupposes certain conditions and dispositions in the person. Among these I would include the following:

- To be on fire with love of Jesus Crucified and inspired by his Gospel vision of working together for the transformation of humanity and the whole creation into the Kingdom of God.

- To have a daily practice that promotes the ongoing process of conversion and personal growth. This will include daily prayer, study and reflection as well as regular spiritual direction.
- To be engaged in a radical and fulfilling missionary outreach that shares Jesus Gospel vision with others, and helps the weakest and most vulnerable people to experience the love and mercy of God.
- To be prepared intellectually, emotionally and spiritually to live and proclaim the Gospel vision of one human family of the beloved children of the Father, living together in mutual understanding and peace, and in harmony with the whole creation.

The Catholic Church has a long and varied history of encountering challenges, setbacks, obstacles and learning to adapt and move forward. On every occasion the Church has learned something and has been enriched. The initial opposition and hesitancy eventually give way to the realization that life and growth call for adaptation and change without sacrificing what is essential.

The Church seeks to influence every aspect of life and culture with the vitalizing energy of the Gospel. In order to achieve that goal, the Church will have to find the language and means to communicate its message intelligently and effectively. This is the way to shine the light of the Gospel and to influence the life of the world. The well formed religious of tomorrow will play a vital role in bringing the light of the Gospel into every aspect of life in the world for the betterment of humanity and of the planet. In this way a renewed religious life will be a credible sign, instrument and anticipation of the Kingdom of God “on earth as in heaven”.

