
PASSIONIST FORMATION FOR MISSION

January 2021

The Jubilee Year is a time to celebrate 300 years of Passionist life and a privileged opportunity to renew our sense of purpose and mission in the Church and for the world. The renewal of our mission calls for a renewal of formation as well. This far-reaching process of renewal begins with a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Passionist charism as intrinsically missionary.

When Paul Daneo was still a young man, he dreamed of gathering companions who would join him in teaching catechism and instructing people in the faith. His dream was realized when he founded the Congregation of the Passion and the first companions joined him. For Paul, the passion of Jesus was the most effective response to the evils afflicting the people. He often lamented the small number of “workers” he had managed to attract and called on his friends and benefactors to pray that God would send many more “workers”. Paul considered his companions to be workers whose life was dedicated to the mission. Of course he wanted them to be men of prayer and charity. He designed a way of life that included long periods of time in prayer and in seclusion in the Retreats. But the motivation was to prepare holy and prayerful workers for the mission. A beautiful community life that is not oriented towards mission is not the dream of Paul of the Cross.

The Passionist charism is the way we focus on the great mystery of the Passion of Jesus seen in the light of our founder’s original intuition. God revealed to Paul Daneo that the passion of Jesus is the greatest revelation of God’s love of the world and the most efficacious remedy for the evils afflicting the world. Paul believed that God was asking him to make this saving mystery known and constantly remembered with love in the Church, for the good of each person and of the whole world. We believe that the charism of the Passion is God’s gift to the Church embodied in the Congregation. It continues to be a source of renewed life for the Church and the world.

The formation of new Passionists takes place in the Church and the world of today. We are deeply conscious of the complex challenges facing us

and want to respond with creativity and energy and with a credible program of initial and ongoing formation. Our founder, Paul Daneo, found in the Passion of Jesus the spiritual resources he needed to found the Congregation, to nourish the lives of the members and to respond to the challenges of his time. We believe that we will find in the Passion of Jesus the spiritual resources and inspiration for our mission today.

The Wider Context of Formation

We are painfully aware of the major challenges and dangers facing humanity and the whole world. Every day we are exposed to the frightening reality of our endangered planet, the social and political turmoil in many countries, the problems of immigrants, the spread of nationalism and intolerance, and the dangers to world peace all of these entail. It is to this word that we are sent with the Gospel of the Passion.

The 21st century is the digital age of mass communication. We live in a globalised world that puts us in immediate contact with all that is happening in the world, good and bad. Catholics are no longer secluded and sheltered in Catholic societies or enclaves. They no longer seek the protection of guardian clergy and religious. For the most part, they no longer live alongside fellow Catholics or go to Catholic schools, participate in Catholic activities. Catholic children mix with and play together with friends of all religions and none. They watch the same TV programs and play the same video games as non-Catholics. They are aware of violence and sex from an early age. They witness parents quarrelling and separating. They have family members who are drug addicts or have died of AIDS. They are bombarded with new information and new forms of entertainment every day. They know about the Big Bang and the possibility of an even bigger “Crunch” when everything will be annihilated. They are fascinated with outer space and alien life. The stories, doctrines, rules and prohibitions of the Church have to find a way into this overpopulated and cluttered culture and world.

Children and young people are growing up in a world that is aware of the faults and sins of many priests and religious. They can no longer be offered an unrealistic and idealised image of the angelic priest who is holier, better, cleaner, purer, and separate from ordinary secular people. Likewise, the religious life can no longer be presented in these unreal and idealised terms. All of this calls for a completely new way of presenting priesthood and religious life as optional forms of the Christian life. We try to present them as attrac-

tive and worthy forms of life, willed by God for the good of the God's people and the whole world. This means that we have to situate these vocations within a richer and more attractive vision of the Christian life in general. This includes a new appreciation of the baptismal call of all the faithful and the new importance given to the dignity and role of the laity in the Church today. We have to avoid both extremes of unrealistic idealisation and negative devaluing of the religious and priestly vocations. Priests and religious are human beings and fellow Christians who are called to follow Jesus as his disciples in a particular way. The joys and sorrows of their life are similar to the joys and sorrows of all Christian and of all people.

Focus on the Passion of Jesus

A renewed formation will be founded on a deep knowledge and love of Jesus crucified. This will be nourished on profound and prolonged study, meditation and prayer. In ways that were not possible for our founder, Passionists today have learned to seek and find Jesus crucified in the poor and afflicted people of the world. We know that the passion of Jesus continues in history and we want to stand with him and minister to him in his ongoing passion. Our encounter with Jesus crucified in meditation and prayer gives us a sensitivity and ability to recognise Jesus in the suffering people of today. Our love of Jesus crucified sends us out with compassion and love to the crucified people of our time. In this way, we make our particular contribution to the spread of the Gospel and the building of the Kingdom of God on earth as in heaven.

Those in formation are helped to develop this twin awareness and love of Jesus crucified on Calvary and in people today. The program of formation will be designed to bring them into close contact with the real situation of suffering people and those struggling with poverty and misfortune. This option for the crucified does not lead to a neglect of others but calls us to share with all people this Gospel vision and its implications. A true love of Jesus on the Cross impels us to love those who are carrying the cross of suffering and affliction all around us.

This new vision of Jesus crucified demands that Passionist missionaries be well trained biblically, theologically and philosophically. We need a strong and credible theological understanding of the Passion as well as effective means of communicating with people today. Passionist religious are men of God who can lead people to a deeper relationship with God in prayer. We al-

so need religious who are psychologically and emotionally mature. They are to be credible witnesses to the new life offered by Jesus to his friends.

We live in a world that is increasingly critical of all authorities and sceptical of religious leaders. The witness of our life will speak louder than words. The Passionist life is one of study, prayer and commitment to people. Formation will be characterized by serious study to the highest levels, a cultivation of the contemplative and mystical dimensions of the Christian life, and a radical commitment to be close to people especially those in most need. Formation is a lifelong process that engages head, heart and hands. From the very beginning, those in formation will be challenged to study hard, to pray constantly and to be close to the poor and suffering.

The Church on Mission

The Passionist Congregation is its true self when it is fully inserted into the heart of the Church and is in tune with the Church. We have been given a part in the mission of the Church and it is in fulfilling this mission that the congregation flourishes and its members grow in faith, hope and love. Our focus is not fixed on ourselves or the wellbeing of the Congregation but rather on the salvation of the world in accordance with the mind of God. The congregation is God's gift to the Church and we believe that as we respond to God's call, the congregation will continue to be blessed.

Pope Francis is constantly reminding us that the Church is missionary by its nature. He is calling for a new missionary awareness and a new willingness on the part of all the baptised to share the joy of the Gospel with the whole world. This doesn't mean that he wants us all to go as missionaries to foreign lands to make new converts there. We are to be missionaries wherever we find ourselves. Pope Francis abhors any kind of proselytising and encourages us to live our Christian faith in a way that will attract and interest others.

Missionaries still go to foreign lands to share the gift of the Gospel. Today they are working without the active support of colonial empires. In that sense, their task is much more difficult than that of their predecessors in the 19th and 20th centuries. They are more like the early Jesuit missionaries to the East who encountered non-believers with great respect and in this way won their attention and interest. It was the witness of the messengers and the intrinsic value of the message that won over those who were at first hostile or indifferent to the Gospel of Jesus in the East.

PASSIONIST FORMATION FOR MISSION

The Passionists want to be part of this new missionary awakening at home and abroad. Passionist missionaries will go out to the whole world with the Gospel of Jesus and a deep respect for the cultures and beliefs of the people they meet. For this to happen, Passionists will have to study not only the scriptures, the history and traditions of the Church but also the beliefs, philosophies and ways of life that give meaning to millions of people who do not know or do not believe in Christ. A new capacity for interreligious dialogue and an ability to communicate with people of no belief will be increasingly important in our missionary work at home and abroad.

Because of the great movement of people and immigration, every country is becoming a new mission territory. New opportunities of presenting the Gospel with freshness and enthusiasm are presenting themselves everywhere. It is no longer a matter of simply repeating the formulae that worked so well in the past. The Gospel and tradition of the Church have to be filtered through the new questions, interests, and cultures of the new people we are sent to meet. This will mean finding new ways of expressing and presenting the life giving message of Jesus.

Conclusion

This year we are celebrating the Jubilee and are praying for the renewal of our mission. With St. Paul of the Cross, we are focused on the Gospel of the Passion as a message of healing and reconciliation for a world threatened by so much suspicion, hatred and division. It is a message of peace for a world afflicted by conflict and war. It is a message of salvation for all who are in need of God. In the Passion of Jesus, the love of God is poured out to transform the world and inaugurate the new creation. We feel privileged to be called and sent with this message to all the people of the world. Through the intercession of St. Paul of the Cross, we ask God to bless us with a new sense of purpose and mission and that we will be able to communicate the love of Jesus crucified to new generations of Passionists.