

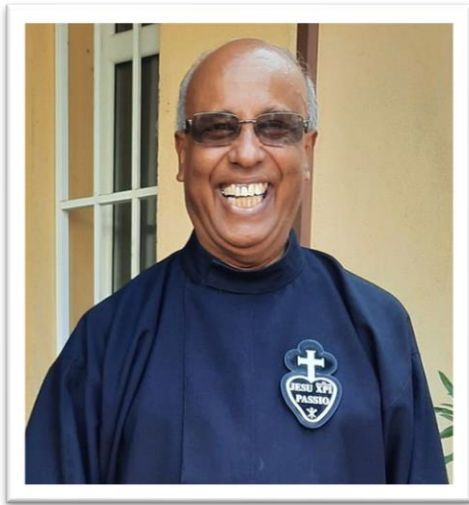


FEAST OF ST PAUL OF THE CROSS

MESSAGE OF THE SUPERIOR GENERAL, FR. JOACHIM REGO, C.P.

19 October 2021

Dear Brothers, Sisters and Friends in the Passionist Family,



As we commemorate the feast of St Paul of the Cross this year, I wish to share with you my experience of an encounter which sparked this reflection.

Recently, during the International Theological Congress on *The Wisdom of the Cross in a Pluralistic World* which our Congregation hosted at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome, I was introduced to a woman who, as I tried to find out more in our conversation about why she was participating in the Congress, revealed that she was a medical doctor who had been working with an NGO in the Tigray region which is the northernmost regional state of Ethiopia. You may be aware that there has been an ongoing civil war in that region since the beginning of November 2020 which has left thousands dead and more than 350,000 people displaced and suffering from famine, disease and shortage of medicines. For many weeks this conflict was international headline news until some more deserving or sensational news took centre-stage.

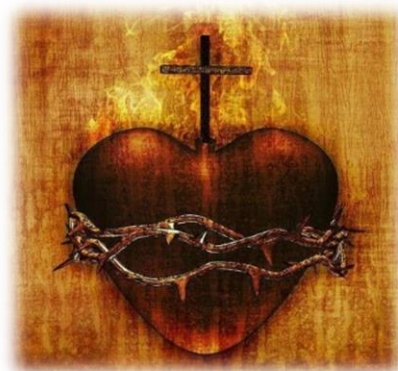
In our brief conversation, the lady doctor, with much emotion, said to me that no one was speaking about Tigray. She said: *“There are thousands of children I was treating who are suffering terribly and who will die unless they get anti-coagulant drugs and essential medicines. We hear nothing about them.”* Feeling somewhat paralysed in the face of such a statement, I said what I thought might have been the answer. *“How can we help?”*, I asked. *“Is there a way of sending some money to help?”* At this, the doctor broke down in tears, without accepting my generous offer of financial assistance and was not able to speak anymore. Struck by her love and concern for the suffering children of Tigray for whom I felt she was weeping, I could find no words to speak either, but was also choked and moved to tears myself. She simply said: *“Father, my children will*



die because they cannot get the basic medicines and we hear nothing about them.” With these words we parted.

As I reflected on this encounter which moved me so much, I thought, obviously, for this woman money was not “*THE*” issue, nor “*THE*” answer. Her comportment spoke of a much deeper love, concern and connection with “*her children*” and people in faraway Tigray who are suffering and dying. And who is speaking about them or remembering them? Like it tends to happen, they become “*the forgotten*”, mere victims and statistics of war and violence, poverty and injustice, abuse and disadvantage. They are the nameless, unfortunate and discarded in our world. “*We hear nothing about them*”. Usually after an initial short period of focus, mainly through news outlets, which can temporarily move our hearts with sorrow and sadness, their plight disappears from the limelight, and we hear nothing much anymore...and life goes on. I couldn’t help but think of my own advantage and privilege in being assured of my supply of medicines every month to keep me comfortable, secure and breathing!

The reaction and demeanour of this woman doctor, however, spoke to me of a person who had a **HEART** for those who are suffering – a heart of flesh filled with compassion, a heart that *suffers with* those who are suffering, a heart that weeps for those who feel abandoned. And even though she did not say why she was participating in the Congress, I understood innately that she was seeking the “*wisdom*” that comes from and is contained in the Cross – the power of God’s love and compassion. Her compassionate heart (fruit of the wisdom of the Cross) was in touch with and was able to reach out to “*her children*” in faraway Tigray, connecting her in a spiritual way with them and assuring them that they are not just statistics or forgotten, but fellow human beings who are loved and remembered as real persons with dignity: children, mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. In this way the **Memory of the Passion** is kept alive.





Further reflection on this encounter moved me to take a deeper look at the condition of my heart because, as Passionists, I believe we are called to be men and women who must **cultivate hearts of compassion** for ourselves and for our mission: “...it is by entering into the pain and suffering of Jesus that we are strengthened to enter into our own pain and suffering, and so are able to stand with others in theirs.” – *A Passionist Heart*

Of course, the essence of compassion is LOVE and, as St Paul of the Cross said: “Love is a unifying power and it makes the pain of the beloved its own.” – L.1, 489 The quality of compassion must be our brand, style, way of being, relating and acting as Passionists. However, compassion as presented in the Gospels, comes with a cost; it requires us to “*suffer with*” another.

After all, the *passionate (loving & suffering) heart* is a prominent symbol in our spirituality and the sign which identifies us. And so, we Passionists need to check our hearts regularly, making sure that they are not hardening, corroding or becoming insensitive to the cries, joys and sorrows of people, creation and our planet which can so easily happen in our busy, distracting and unreflective age. In prayerful contemplation, we are called to make our stance in life at the foot of the Cross where we contemplate that Crucified Heart of Jesus which does not seek pity for itself, but instead empties itself in solidarity and compassion (*suffers with*) for all the ‘*crucified*’ of the universe. Our seeming ‘*useless*’ standing by the Cross requires a strength and resilience to **be present** and let our heart connect with the Heart of the Crucified One, drawing from it the gift of compassion (God’s gift, not our doing). This is what enables and moves us to similarly look with pity, draw near, embrace, include, forgive and carry the lost, abandoned and forgotten of this world. We create room for them in our hearts and support them in spirit, prayer and kind.



*We wish to share in the distress of all,
Especially those who are poor and neglected;
we seek to offer them comfort
and to relieve the burden of their sorrow.*

~ Const. 3

In reflecting on Henri Nouwen's notion of "compassionate prayer", Sr Therese O'Regan CP in a paper titled *Tell the world of God's great Compassion - the heart of our Passionist* calling wrote:

One of the most powerful experiences in a life of compassion is the expansion of our hearts into a world embracing space of healing from which no one is excluded. Prayer for others is the very beat of a compassionate heart - to pray for another means to allow their suffering, anxieties, loneliness, their confusion and fears to resound in our own innermost selves. But in the midst of that experience, I realise that compassion is not mine but God's gift to me. I cannot embrace the world, but God can. I cannot pray, but God can pray in me. When God became as we are (Incarnation), that is when God allowed all of us into his intimate life, it became possible for us to share in his infinite compassion. In prayer, the unprincipled dictator and vicious torturer can no longer remain the object of our fear, hatred, revenge because when we pray, we stand at the centre of the great mystery of Divine Compassion. Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed this with powerful simplicity when he wrote that to pray for others is to give them the same right as we have received, namely, to stand before Christ and share in His mercy.



On this feast of our founder St Paul of the Cross, in this year of our Congregation's jubilee of foundation reflecting on "Renewing our Mission", I share with you these thoughts which were sparked in me following my chance encounter with the woman doctor who revealed to me her compassionate heart that suffers with, cries for, and calls for our attention to the world's suffering people, the 'crucified' who are often forgotten. "We hear nothing about them", but "they are all our children". As Passionists, we are called to keep alive the Memory of the Passion which continues until the end of time. We do this by cultivating the gift of **loving compassion** which allows us to stand with and act on behalf of those who suffer.

A reporter covering the tragic conflict in the middle of Sarajevo saw a little girl shot by a sniper. He threw down his note pad and pencil, rushed to the man holding the child, and helped them both into his car. As the reporter stepped on the accelerator, racing to the hospital, the man holding the bleeding child said: "*Hurry, friend, my child is still alive.*" A moment or two later he said: "*Hurry, friend, my child is still breathing.*" A moment later he said: "*Hurry, friend, my child is still warm.*" Finally, he cried: "*Hurry, oh God, my child is getting cold.*" When they got to the hospital, the little girl had died. Later, as the two men washed the blood off their hands and clothes, the man turned to the reporter and said: "*There is a terrible task waiting for me. I must go and tell her father that his child is dead. He will be heartbroken.*" The reporter was amazed. He looked at the grieving man and said: "*I thought she was your child.*" The man looked back and said: "*They are all our children.*".

May the Passion of Jesus be always in our hearts.

***May the blessings and prayers of St Paul of the Cross
lead us to God's Heart.***


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