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# A PASSION FOR PEACE

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*“He made peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1, 20).*

## A Time of War

I write this as war rages in Ukraine. People are dying, an entire country is being destroyed, and every day the suffering is spreading. The world is just emerging from two years of the Covid pandemic that had already plunged us into the darkness of death, sorrow and great uncertainty. People are asking, is there any end to the nightmare? I began writing this as part of the Jubilee to mark 300 years of Passionist life. In the meantime, war in Ukraine has erupted and everything is changed. We still want to thank God for St. Paul of the Cross, and for all that God has given to the Congregation for the service of the Church and the world. We find ourselves in a moment of crisis and pray for God’s help. We have to pause, reflect and pray for the people of Ukraine and the whole world, and ask what God may be asking of the Church and the Passionists in the terrible circumstances of these days and into the future.

There is war in Ukraine but the whole world is divided with many people feeling vulnerable and insecure. It is an atmosphere that can easily drift into even greater polarization and mutual mistrust. Mischievous politicians everywhere are exploiting the fears of people for their narrow political advantage. Misinformation heightens people’s fears and this then leads to more anger and resentment towards those who are seen as different and regarded as a threat.

Fear, suspicion and mistrust sow the seeds of anger, hatred and violence. Compassion and understanding of the sufferings of others



become ever more difficult. Human decency and respect are soon forgotten. In these circumstances, our very humanity is at risk. The disciples of Jesus must be the first to resist the slide into inhumanity, and search for a way forward and a just solution to these many difficult issues.

### A Mission of Peace

Jesus announced the arrival of the Kingdom in his words and embodied it in his actions. The Church is the instrument designed by God to prolong the action and mission of Jesus in history. It is through the life and action of his Church, that Christ now acts in the world. What is this action? Like Jesus, the Church announces the arrival of the Kingdom and works to make it already tangible in the experience of love and truth, justice and peace, joy and reconciliation.

The life of the Kingdom can be summed up in the word *Shalom*, the peace that God longs for us and that only God can give. Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises of God announced by the prophet who looked forward to the Messiah, “in his days justice will flourish and peace till the moon fails” (Ps. 72). At the coming of the Messiah there will be no more war or conflict causing division, suffering and death: “They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Is. 2, 4). The new age will be marked by the peace foretold by the prophets (Is. 11 1-9) and that the Risen Jesus shares with his disciples and friends, “Peace be with you” (John 20, 19).

God wants *shalom* or peace for his people and his world. *Shalom* means wholeness and an end of division and fragmentation either in society, in the world or within the person. It means completeness, or fulfillment. It is a time of prosperity, justice and security, “They shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid” (Micah 4, 4). The kingdom of God means peace between humans, between the nations and with all the

creatures of the earth. The whole of God's creation will be at peace and there will be no more exploitation of people or of God's beautiful earth.

Jesus is the prince of peace who ushers in the Kingdom of God (Is 9, 5). Peace is the great sign of the Kingdom. The angels sing of this peace at the birth of Jesus (Luke 2, 14). Jesus was sent by the Father to proclaim the Good News that the Kingdom of God is at hand. It is the Good News of peace (Eph. 2, 17) and his mission is to be the one who will guide our steps into the way of peace (Luke 1, 79). Those who experience the salvation that Jesus brings are able to 'go in peace' (Luke 7, 50: 8, 48). God's peace means the healing of every division and the reconciling of opponents. It is the peace the world craves but cannot give. Jesus is the prince of peace who by dying on the cross healed divisions, reconciled differences, and united all things in heaven and on earth.

In the peace of the Kingdom, all people are gathered and welcomed; people experience forgiveness and share the joy of being together. There are no more divisions or distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, the powerful and the weak. *Shalom* means that there are no more reasons for war or conflict; no more reasons for suspicion and resentment; no more reasons for anger and revenge. A new order has been inaugurated. It is the Kingdom of God.

The *Shalom* of the Kingdom of God means that the poor and the weak are blessed, the sorrowful experience comfort, the peacemakers are honored (Mat. 5, 3-12). In the Kingdom of God, there is no division or conflict between persons or nations. It is a state of harmony and unity where everyone is at home, everyone is blessed with plenty, and everyone is at peace.

After more than two thousand years, we ask where is the Kingdom? We long for peace and the end of war here and now. The Kingdom of God still seems very far from the world where conflict, violence and war are still bringing destruction, suffering and death every day. We are still waiting in joyful hope for the full revelation of the Kingdom. In the meantime, we do not stand idly by. The Church is on mission;

the Church is the herald, the sacrament and the servant of the Kingdom of God. Every baptized Christian is called to be a peacemaker and to work for the arrival of God's Kingdom on earth as in heaven.

### **“My gift to the world is Peace.”**

The entire Gospel is pervaded by the message of peace, from the singing of the angels at Bethlehem to the appearance of Jesus after the Resurrection. During his last meal with the disciples Jesus said, “Peace I leave you, my peace I give you” (John 14, 27). Peace is the great promise at the beginning and peace is the life-changing experience of the disciples who encounter the risen Lord. This is God's gift to the world today through the ministry of his Church.

“That earthly peace which arises from love of neighbour symbolizes and results from the peace of Christ which radiates from God the Father. For by the cross the incarnate Son, the prince of peace reconciled all people with God. By thus restoring all men and women to the unity of one people and one body, He slew hatred in His own flesh; and, after being lifted on high by His resurrection, He poured forth the spirit of love into the hearts of people” (G.S. 78).

Fired by the message of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI went to the UN as a pilgrim of peace. He appealed to the leaders of the world to work together for lasting peace and the end of all wars. “*No more war*”, he pleaded.

True and lasting peace is God's wonderful gift. The peace of the Kingdom transforms the heart and fills us with new life. But the peace Jesus gives is not just for the individual. It is for the renewal of the whole world beginning with the Christian community (Eph. 4, 3).

Jesus's way is the way of peace and not physical force. In him the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled. He will preside over a dominion of boundless peace (Is. 9, 6). Jesus opposes violence and those who use

it. When his life is threatened he prevents his followers from resorting to the sword (Mat. 26, 52). Like the apostles, we are sent out into the world with the Gospel of peace.

## The Passionist Response

The Messiah ushered in the messianic age of *Shalom*. The mission of the Church is to be the sign, instrument and prefiguring of the God's Kingdom of peace on earth as it is in heaven. Passionists share this mission of the Church to be the instruments of God's peace and the pointers to the Kingdom.

Jesus addressed his good news about the Kingdom to the suffering, despised and marginalised majority who suffered at the hands of the privileged elite in Jerusalem. At the heart of the Gospel message is the story of Jesus who suffered and gave his life for love of us and rose again to give us new life. In the passion of Jesus, God chose to identify with suffering humanity. When he was raised up on the cross Jesus drew the gaze of all people to the suffering inflicted on God's people everywhere by the powerful of this world. On the cross, Jesus pledges God's saving love for the suffering and brutalised people. He also pronounces judgement on those who inflict suffering on the innocent and the weak. Jesus brought God's kingdom of love, justice, and peace into the world and overturned the kingdoms of violence and injustice. On the cross, he reconciled heaven and earth (Col. 1,20) and broke down the walls of hatred, violence, and injustice that separate people (Eph. 2, 14).

The mission of the Passionists is to stand by Jesus in his suffering. Today that means to stand with the people of Ukraine and all the victims of war and violence. We are to be witnesses and instruments of his peace that overcomes all division and separation. The international Congregation of the Passion has communities in every continent, in contact with many different cultures and religions. We are ideally placed to participate in the great mission of the Church to be an instrument of peace, reconciliation and unity. We can do this by placing the cross at the center of our life and mission and recalling

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the words of Jesus “When I am lifted up I will draw all people to myself” (John 12, 32). Jesus came to make peace and to reconcile people by the blood of the cross (Col. 1, 20).

The mission of the Passionists is part of the universal mission of the Church to be the sign and sacrament of the unity of all people. In *Gaudium et Spes* we read, “By virtue of her mission to shed on the whole world the radiance of the Gospel message, and to unify under one Spirit all men and women of whatever nation, race or culture, the Church stands forth as a sign of that brotherhood which allows honest dialogue and gives it vigour” (92). Passionists share in this mission of promoting the unity of all people and the healing and reconciliation of every division.

In these times, our mission has become clearer than ever. Together with the whole Church we hear the call of the Father to gather the whole of humanity into the one family of God. We make our own this vision of the Church and her mission to bring the Good News to all people for the renewal and transformation of the whole world.

The cross is the tree of life around which all people can gather to be nourished, healed and saved. The great challenge facing us is to find the most effective ways and means of doing this. We will continue to preach the Gospel to those believers who gather for worship or who come to us. More than ever, we will go out to those who do not know Jesus or who have moved away from the Church. We remember that the preaching of the Good News is always accompanied by the gift of peace (Luke 10, 5).

### **Pacem in Terris**

The great encyclical and last will and testament of Good Pope St. John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, opened up new dimensions of the Church’s mission to the world. From now on the whole Church is dedicated to the promotion of the peace and well-being of the whole world. This is our mission too. In these times of war and the increasing tension and mistrust among people and nations, we need to double our efforts and intensify our prayers for God’s peace to reign in the world. In this

time when powerful nations can invade neighbouring nations and bring destruction, suffering and death we proclaim the Gospel of Peace and dedicate ourselves to the work of peace, reconciliation and healing.

I conclude these few reflections with the closing words and prayer of Pope John from *Pacem in Terris*.

“Let us, then, pray with all fervour for the peace which our divine Redeemer came to bring us. May He banish from the souls of men whatever might endanger peace. May He transform all men into witnesses of truth, justice and brotherly love. May He illumine with His light the minds of rulers, so that, besides caring for the proper material welfare of their peoples, they may also guarantee them the fairest gift of peace.

Finally, may Christ inflame the desires of all men to break through the barriers which divide them, to strengthen the bonds of mutual love, to learn to understand one another, and to pardon those who have done them wrong.

Through His power and inspiration may all peoples welcome each other to their hearts as brothers, and may the peace they long for ever flower and ever reign among them.” Amen.