

April 2022

Passionist News Notes

St. Paul of the Cross Province



Inaugural Retreat Schedule for The Passionist's Thomas Berry Place

7	Edwin Moran
12	Luis Alfredo Lopez Galarza
13	Enzo DelBrocco
17	Junesh Vakapadath
25	Earl Keating Jerome McKenna Gregory Paul
28	Timothy Fitzgerald John McMillan
30	Lucian Clark Joseph Jones

Thomas Berry Place invites you to a weekend of prayer and reflection:

March 4-5, 2022 *Schedule is the same for each weekend:*

- Fr. Jim O'Shea, CP
- Sr. Karen Cavanagh, CSJ

Friday Evening:

- 6:00 pm- Arrival
- 6:30 pm- Dinner and Gathering Talk
- 8:30 pm- Evening Prayer

March 11-12, 2022

- Fr. Enzo Del Brocco, CP

March 18-19, 2022 *Saturday: (Times may vary)*

- Fr. Robin Ryan, CP
- 8:00 am- Breakfast
- 9:00 am- Session 1

March 25-26, 2022

- Fr. Edward Beck, CP
- Break
- 12:00 pm- Lunch
- 2:00 pm- Session 2

April 1-2, 2022

- Fr. Jim Price, CP
- Fr. Michael Greene, CP
- Confession
- Mass
- Dinner

Optional overnight with Sunday Brunch



2	Michael Rowe
10	James Barry
13	Jerome McKenna Jerome Bracken
16	Salvatore Riccardi
21	David Monaco
22	Michael Stomber
27	Junesh Vakapadath
28	Gregory Paul

We are excited to announce our inaugural Retreat Schedule for The Passionist's Thomas Berry Place in March 2022, appropriately for the start of our 2022 Lenten season.

For more information, please contact Ellen Rhatigan, Program Director at 929-419-7500 option 8.

Lent, Ezekial, and the Valley of Dry Bones

by Fr Richard Frechette, CP Port au Prince, Haiti

Lent is about learning the best way to suffer, **because we cannot avoid suffering, and because suffering the wrong way can be very dangerous.** Lent is about opening our eyes to our own destructive thinking, speaking, and acting, **because we can increase peace of mind, and peace on earth, by turning away from these.** This is very timely wisdom for us. The world can be a pretty cruel place, and most cruelty is of our human making.

The bombing in Ukraine is deplorable, especially of civilians. It is heart wrenching, and visible to every one of us by the minute. Even more, each one of us are witnesses to cruelty in many forms, from our various corners of the world, that few others see.

Suffering literally means "to bear under" the pain that invades us, Pain enters us through what we feel and see, and encodes itself even physically with us, because we can never "un-see" what we have seen. Suffering then becomes an emotional and spiritual force to be reckoned with. Our pain can bind us in heart to the one suffering. Compassion means we "suffer together", and it naturally generates a concrete act of solidarity. (I will also shave my head, when your lose your hair from your chemo.) But pain poorly managed can kill compassion, and become destructive of self and others. When pain is a lot, extended, and relentless, compassion can wither and be replaced first by apathy, melancholy, despondency, and then by anger and hostility.

Lent gives us life lessons in the **sanctification of suffering.** This is a holy art, a gift of the Holy Spirit, and **leads to the perfection, rather than the decay, of compassion.** In Lent, we relive our annual ritual embrace of a huge contradiction: Jesus came to bring life, life fully, and life always. yet this brought him rejection, defamation, and the cruelest form of public death. In Lent, we have before us the scandalous mystery that even God became the victim of human cruelty, the confounding paradox of a Crucified God.

Moses, on the scorching sands of the desert, held up on a pole the very serpent whose venomous bite had sickened the people, so that their very contemplation of both their plague and its cause, would bring them healing. For the Christian, this is symbolic teaching that accepting, and directly contemplating the cross that we cannot escape, is how we find both our healing and our victory.

This is the alchemy for dealing with what is both venomous and impossible to "un-see".

Mystics through the ages have meditated on the suffering of the crucified God, as the way to heal themselves and others of the deadly and merciless cruelties wrought by humanity enslaved by sin.

Three weeks ago, on Shrove Tuesday, as we prayed vespers we were disturbed by close, heavy gunfire.

I said to Fr Hugo and Wilfo, with wishful thinking, "maybe they are Mardi Gras fireworks."

But we have all gotten pretty good at telling gunshots from fireworks, so that distraction did not last long.

As the shooting continued, our instincts were to drive over to our compound, since we were worried about our staff and children who were in the middle of it. But to go there would be to drive directly to our deaths, since phone messages from staff related that the bandits were many, were at our gates and on our walls.

A few anguished hours later, after four different police interventions calmed the area by shooting into the air (Augustel, Kenson, Raphael and Gehy all went into high gear with personal friendships among the police), we spoke to our teams by phone and were assured everyone was all right- at least for now.

As we celebrated ash Wednesday mass early the next morning, and we marked our foreheads with the ash of burned palm, someone came to the chapel to tell me that it wasn't quite accurate that everyone was alright. There was a charred car near our school gate, and within it, a body burned to ashes.

Fr Hugo and I, and some others who were at mass, set off for that nightmare just down the street, in order to have prayers for the dead. The scene was a horror, and our confronting it with prayer was our own **raid on the unspeakable**, to borrow the most accurate expression of what it felt like, from the American Trappist monk, Thomas Merton. Vested in Alb and stole, legs steadied by our ever-tested faith, armed only with the psalms, we looked squarely at the literal meaning of the Lenten ashes. Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return.

Our minds were distracted, our lips stumbled over the prayers, our arms were raised in blessing. We had the audacity by our ritual, on a public street full of the both the **horrified and the amused**, to reconfirm that emptiness is fullness, that loss is gain, that when you have lost everything you have even more.

The soul, the life force that is the gift of God, is **everything**. We comforted the shocked soul, separated from the body with no warning and in such a brutal way, and prayed for clear vision and radiant light as the soul journeyed to God. The psalms were eloquent and bold, but the words of the poet Rumi also came speedily to mind: "When the undertaker has well bound my closed jaw, you will still hear my music, **coming from my dead silence.**"

The unspeakable spoke. As we approached the car, I inadvertently kicked bullet shells with my boots. It was now evident that he was shot and then burned. I thought, thank God he was shot first and not burned alive. And then I was shocked by my thought as if I had traded in the striving for life, life fully and life always, for a less terrible choice on a hierarchy of horrors. As I heard once so wisely spoken **be careful your thoughts don't start to think you**. If they do, we can slowly start to settle for less than the highest and the best- much, much less. The inner work of nurturing compassion against burnout is long and hard, and there is no guarantee. You cannot let your guard down at all.

The very next day, Raphael and I went once again into the dark labyrinth of the underworld of the gangs that are terrorizing the population. We have been there often enough, especially to try to free those in the human bondage of kidnapping. Because of multiple kidnappings even of priests and nuns, and the necessary closing of parishes and Church works, we were working with the archbishop and the priests of the affected deanery, to try to work out a "humanitarian corridor" in that vast crime ridden area.

We headed into the underworld to express to the gang leaders our willingness to trade in humanitarian and spiritual works for cease fires, and for respect of worship and benevolent work. We want to reopen the churches. We had two other objectives with the bandits: we needed guaranteed safe passage the next day to reach a missionary Sister in a place called "Ti Marche" (little market). And thirdly, Fr David had called on Ash Wednesday to say the brother of Sister Paesi's administrator was kidnapped on Shrove Tuesday night. His name is Yvon. So we wanted to bring up his case with the bandits to try work his release. I cannot pretend these visits are not unnerving.

To see so many teenagers in crime, guns bigger than they are, and to have those guns pulled on you. To feel your life depends on the mercy of angry and drugged 15-year-olds, who hate you and don't even know why, and they will hate you until they are told not to hate you, by someone above them in their skewed hierarchy. To be speaking anything humanitarian **to the very ones who are trashing humanity**, blows your mind with hurricane force gales, and it is totally impossible to keep your equilibrium unless you feel a deep calling, even divine mandate, to work for life, life fully and always.

In ancient times, some Popes would meet and negotiate with barbarians outside the city, to prevent the destruction of Rome and the structures of civilization. I have read that some bishops, in territories controlled drug dealers and traffickers, meet with them to try to steer their very real and nasty power in more humane directions. Jesus spoke with Satan more than once, even instructing him in proper understanding of scripture.

There are solid precedents to this distasteful work.

There is still one more exalted requirement from Jesus that is part of this work: His will that not even one be lost. So this is necessarily another dimension of our motivation- can even one, or maybe some, or even most of these teenagers be converted away from this death trap they think is life? We have coaxed more than a few into a better life, by trying to be father, or brother, or friend for them, and by giving hard work with fair pay- and it is well worth the trying.

Back to the bandits: after a beer or two, and some shared white rice, we were in open dialogue, and the gang leaders were calling colleagues everywhere to find Yvon. With no luck. Some days later, Fr David called to say the family found Yvon's car near us in Tabarre, burned to char, and a body in it burned to ash. It was like a stomach punch.

The first suffering this car and its ghastly inhabitant brought to us was existential suffering. The focus is on yourself. "This could have been me", if we had walked into this violence three nights ago. The suffering this burned car now brought us was personal. This was not a pile of ashes. This was Yvon, a person, loved and sought after in desperation.

It became personal: talking to Yvon's brother Marcel on the phone. By WhatsApp receiving a picture of Yvon's smiling and vibrant face. God help us. The dry bones and ashes of Ezekiel's valley suddenly took on flesh. Yvon arose from ashes and became real to us, that name so carefully chosen by his mom and dad. We had now seen his face, which also can never be "un-seen." His birthday would have been the next day. His hopes, his dreams, his strivings- all went to ashes in a savage way. I told Marcel what I knew about that night, about the bullets that at least meant instant death, about our prayers for his brother's soul. Marcel asked me if maybe Yvon was kidnapped, and this pile of ashes was not his brother but rather a bandit who stole his car.

I started wishing that Yvon was kidnapped. **I had never before wished that anyone was kidnapped.**

First, I was glad he was shot, now I wished he were kidnapped. **My thoughts were starting to think me again.** (*How do I get off this runaway train?*) Being kidnapped would mean at least Yvon was likely alive, but it would not delete the reality of this charred person. It would only move the focus. I reasoned with Marcel that kidnappers had never yet called him to negotiate for Yvon, and that the very leaders of kidnappers could not find Yvon anywhere in their holdings. There could be no doubt that these were the remains of Yvon.

These are the ancient teachings by which we are healed and regain some balance during the long lent of life. We pray, starting with praise, followed by thanksgiving, and finally presenting our anguishes to God in prayer. For a stronger dose of this spiritual medicine, let your first prayer be for your enemies.

We perform acts of self-denial, such as fasting - sacrificial acts for when you cannot physically help the person suffering. The denial of daily and ordinary comforts can also alter our state of awareness to more exalted forms.

Ad Majora. We increase the good we think, the good we speak, the good we do. This is paramount.

St Paul says, faith without works is lifeless. In a mindful way, we look toward tomorrow and not back to yesterday, hopeful of much better days, convinced we will get there.

For as long as when we look around us we still see, as St Paul says, Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free (Gal 3:28), then we are blind to the oneness of the human family as ordained by God. We see categories of nobodies, bags of bones. The day we start to see a person, everywhere we look, in every place and at every time, then we know the prophesy of Ezekiel is becoming real in our hearts.

In a way, Lent is the Church's **allowed depression**. A sanctioned and ritualized depression. Depression is often a normal backdrop in the long lent of life. It is allowed, it is to be understood, and even respected.

But we are **not allowed to stay there**. We have to start to shake the dust off our sandals, arise from the ashes, and follow the God of life.

May our strength be in Jesus' own witness of how to bear suffering in the good way, and in our determination to walk the talk together, as one family belonging to God.

Fr Richard Frechette CP
Third Week of Lent, 2022
Port au Prince, Haiti