

The Passionist Charism

A PASSION FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD

“Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith. For the sake of the joy that lay before him he endured the cross, despising its shame and taking his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12, 2).

The author of Hebrews tells us to learn from Jesus how to endure the cross as the way that leads to the glory of the Kingdom of God. In this article, I want to show that the passion was the *Way* Jesus chose to walk in order to achieve his goal of establishing the Kingdom of God. The passion is not the goal of Jesus life nor is it the goal of the Christian life. The unanimous view of the New Testament is that Jesus willingly endured his passion and death for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Jesus did not glory in suffering nor seek it. He willingly accepted the suffering inflicted upon him in order to fulfill his mission to establish the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Our Constitutions (1984) make the link between the passion and the kingdom in several places (nos. 2, 5, 7, 62, 75). Passionists also experience a direct link between contemplative union with Jesus and the work of establishing the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. I believe that a new awareness of the link between the *Passion* and the *Kingdom of God* can be a source of inspiration and energy for our young religious and seminarians as well as for lay people today.

The Founder’s Summary of our Mission

In his many writings, the late Fr. Fabiano Giorgini CP helped us to appreciate Paul of the Cross’s original and deeply evangelical inspiration. Paul’s vocation was to be a missionary, that is, to announce the Good News. He was moved by the sad condition of people and the danger to their faith. He found in the passion of Jesus the most effective means of pursuing this missionary goal



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In the *Short Account* of the Congregation he wrote in 1747, our founder gives us the essential elements of the Passionist life as he saw it. His great conviction was that God had raised up this new Institute. Paul had a strong sense that God was moved by the sad plight of people of that pitiable and distressing time. As Paul saw things, there was every kind of iniquity and this was causing great harm to our holy faith. He believed that the loving remembrance of the passion could help deliver people from these perils but unfortunately “the whole world was sliding into a profound forgetfulness of the passion” and even the faithful were largely ignorant or indifferent to the passion of Jesus.

Given this perilous state of affairs, the Congregation had a very precise mission. It is the aim of the Congregation, Paul says, to root out disorders, remove vice, foster virtue, and set souls on the way of perfection to heaven. The whole thrust of the new congregation is to go to the people and offer them a sure remedy for the ills that afflicted them, especially those that cause them to forget Jesus’ passion and so weaken their faith. The principal means to achieve this mission is the loving remembrance of the passion. Today we might use a different language but the message is the same. The goal is union with God and a good Christian life, and the most effective means is the loving remembrance of the passion of Jesus. According to Paul, the passion is the most effective *means* for obtaining every good.

Jesus and the Kingdom of God

Jesus was consumed with a passion for the Kingdom of God. His whole life and ministry was focused on the Kingdom. This was God’s will for him and for the world. The Kingdom was at hand and would bring about a completely new way of being-in-the-world.

After his baptism by John, Jesus went throughout the land announcing the Gospel of the Kingdom (Matt. 4, 23) and he also showed us what the Kingdom is like. It is the fullness of life and joy that can be experienced only by renouncing every human ambition for power, wealth, possessions and status. Jesus “emptied himself” (Phil. 2,7) and in this way showed us the way to enter the Kingdom. “My kingdom is not like the kingdoms of this world”, Jesus told Pilate. It is not characterized by political or military power, it does not use violence to coerce people, it does not seek to impose itself or dominate people. Jesus attracts people to the Kingdom by his message and example

of mercy, healing and love. “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened.” He told the people not to worry about unimportant things but to seek the kingdom of God above all things (Matt. 6, 33).

The way of Jesus is the way of emptiness. Speaking to the rich young man, Jesus said “Go and sell all you possess”. The parable of the Prodigal Son shows us that the young son had first to loose all his possessions before he came to his senses. Those who worry about power, wealth and possessions are unable to hear the Good News and cannot see what Jesus is showing them. The rich man did not see poor Lazarus and so lost his way; the foolish rich man built more barns to hold his abundant harvest but died before he could enjoy his fortune. “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

The Kingdom of God means the fullness of life because it is about being in love with God, our neighbors and our enemies; it is about peace and harmony and the end to conflict and violence; it is about justice for the poor and oppressed and food for the hungry. The kingdom of God fills us with a joy and peace the world does not know. The kingdom can come only when each one learns to let go of the craving to accumulate power, wealth and possessions. It is this freedom to embrace emptiness that prepares us to be filled with the new life and joy only God can give. Unless we are empty of all the things that clutter our lives, our minds and our hearts there will be no room in our lives for the gift of God’s kingdom.

Jesus adopted a life of radical emptiness to counter the great temptations of power, wealth, possessions and status. These are the forces that corrupt the heart and blind us to the needs of our fellow human beings. Every evil has its root in these hungers. The only way to clear the ground for the new Kingdom of God is to confront these cravings and empty ourselves of them. Jesus emptied himself and become like a servant, living like the poor with “nowhere to lay his head”. He lived and walked among the poor because it was there that the Kingdom of God would take root. “Blessed are you poor because the Kingdom of God is yours.” The powerful and the wealthy hated Jesus and sought to destroy him from the beginning. The poor welcomed him and accompanied him on his journeys. The authorities wanted to kill him but were afraid of the crowds who loved him. The Kingdom belongs to these.

Jesus showed through his ministry how the Kingdom would look and how his followers, by their compassionate and selfless service, could associate themselves with him in his work, and reverse the situation of those who are poor, who mourn, who hunger, who are voiceless (Mt 5, 3-11). Through the mission of his disciples, the poor of all times can experience the arrival of the Kingdom.

The Kingdom and the Passion

Jesus' passion and death is inextricably linked to his ministry of proclaiming the arrival of the Kingdom of God and the promise of a great reversal of fortunes for the poor and afflicted people of the world. The gospels show us that Jesus' life culminates in his passion and death and make it clear that his death was not an accident or something that simply happened at the end of his life because God decreed it. Jesus suffered and died because of his total commitment to God's plan to establish a new kind of Kingdom where justice and peace, love and joy would reign on earth as God had always intended. Jesus' speaking and acting to achieve this end brought him into conflict with the upholders of the other kingdoms and centers of power.

The religious and political leaders, both local and foreign, acted together to defend their power and their interests. They conspired to eliminate Jesus and silence his message. As a result, Jesus died for the sake of the Kingdom of God. It is as "king" that Jesus is mocked and crucified, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews". In his passion, Jesus shows how far he is willing to go to fulfill his mission in obedience to the Father. Jesus willingly suffered and died for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

In John's gospel, it is precisely in the passion narrative that the theme of the Kingdom comes to prominence. Jesus before Pilate is revealed as a new kind of King who does not rely on worldly power to accomplish his mission. He reveals the truth about God's Kingdom that is completely different from the kingdom represented by Pilate. Pilate has the power to threaten death; Jesus has come to give life. When he is lifted up on the cross, Jesus is revealed as the true king whose reign is one of total self-giving love (John 15, 13). From the cross, Jesus the king hands over his Spirit to initiate the new age and the transformation of the whole creation.

The Kingdom “on earth as in heaven.”

It is important to stress that the biblical understanding of the Kingdom is not an interior spiritual presence, nor is it a hope for a wholly different order. The Kingdom of God does not mean that good people will go to heaven when they die. Jesus message about the Kingdom is rather about the transformation of the face of the earth and of human history. God did not create the world to save us out of it, but rather wants to save us by transforming the world for a new humanity.

The Good News is not that we will be released from this material world, with its suffering and imperfections, and go to our new spiritual home in heaven. Rather, the Kingdom will come down from heaven to earth. The New Jerusalem will be on earth and it is here that the Lord will dwell in the midst of his people (Rev. 21, 1-3). It is not an immaterial Kingdom where saved souls will live in heaven freed from the weight of their bodily existence. The whole creation is longing to share in the glory of the new creation that is the Kingdom of God (Rom. 8, 19-21).

We believe in the resurrection of the body. Our human bodies are the outcome of 13 billion years of cosmic evolution. The Resurrection is the promise that the whole cosmos will be transformed and at last we will see the fulfillment of God’s plan for creation from before time began. We will rejoice with the whole creation and, all together with Christ, we will come to share in the very fullness of God’s life (Eph. 3,19).

The early Fathers insisted strongly against the heretics that the Kingdom of God included this earth and was not purely spiritual. St. Irenaeus (130-200 AD) writes against those who deny the coming of the Kingdom on earth: “The righteous are the first to receive the promise of the inheritance and will reign in it, when they rise again to behold God in this creation which is renovated. . . It is in the very creation in which they toiled or were afflicted, being proved in every way by suffering, that they should also receive the reward of their suffering.”

The Implications for the Passionist Mission

What are the implications of this message for the Passionists and how does it challenge us? The Constitutions (1984) state: “The Passion of Jesus reveals the power of God which penetrates the world, destroying the power of evil and building up the Kingdom of God” (no. 5). Passionists today are called to continue the mission of Jesus “by working for the establishment of the Kingdom of God” (Cons. 2). This implies that we are prepared to share in Jesus’ passion, to suffer and die with him if necessary in our struggle to overcome evil and to establish the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

The particular mission of the Passionists is to preach the Gospel of Christ by keeping alive the memory of Jesus suffering and death. We do this not simply to provoke in the hearers sentiments of guilt or sorrow for sin or even admiration for Jesus; it’s not aimed at shaming the sinner into repentance; it’s not simply to deepen the devotion and prayer life of believers; nor is it only for the comfort and consolation of the sorrowing. The Passionists keep alive the memory of Jesus’ passion so that the mission of Jesus to bring about the Kingdom of God “on earth as it is in heaven” will be continued in time.

What are the major challenges facing the world today? In recent weeks we have been shocked by the images of war, destruction and death in Ukraine. Few people alive today thought they would ever again see war in Europe and the threat of nuclear annihilation in the background. The world needs to be transformed by the power of the gospel that dispels hatred and sows the deeds of peace. We have to be the messengers of peace and more urgently to be peace makers. In our words, deeds, and prayers, we have to be the witnesses to the Resurrection message of peace to all people. The Church is the sacrament of the unity of humanity and no effort can be spared to bring peace into every corner of the world. Wherever there is division, suspicion, hatred, exclusion the Church is there to announce the Good News that all people are made in God’s image and called to be the one family of God.

The environmental crisis together with the Covid 19 pandemic show how much we have taken life on earth for granted and the need to take greater care of the material world of which we are an integral part and on which we depend. When the planet is suffering we all suffer. The Good News

embraces God's love of the whole cosmos and his plan for the cosmos to manifest the beauty and glory of God. Humans have to wake up to their responsibility to heal the broken and suffering planet and to care for all of creation. This too is part of God's plan and of our mission.

In both war and the destruction of the earth it is the poor, the aged and the weak who bear the greatest burden. These are the ones whose cry rises up before God and to whom we are sent. From our prayerful union with Jesus in his Passion, we come to understand and feel the consequences of brutal power and heartless greed. From our sharing with Jesus, we derive the inspiration and energy to challenge those who want to dominate and lord it over others. In the Passion of Jesus, we learn how to stand with the oppressed and suffering poor of the world. United with Jesus, we share his willingness to accept whatever hardship, sacrifice and suffering may come our way as we work for the coming of God's kingdom.

Passionists respond to the mystery of the Passion by seeing in the one glance the passion of Jesus and the sufferings of the crucified people of today. Jesus continues to suffer and die in the forgotten and broken people of the world, "the Passion of Christ and the sufferings of His mystical Body form one mystery of salvation" (no. 65). Our love for Jesus crucified is shown most convincingly in our love of the poor and the suffering people of our world.

Thy Kingdom come on Earth as in Heaven!