

NOTES ON PASSIONIST FORMATION SUMMER 2022

1. The Revised General Plan of Formation

The *Revised General Plan of Formation* will be discussed at the General Synod of the Congregation in September 2022. This document has been around since the General Chapter 2018 and every Passionist has had a chance to read it and offer suggestions to improve it. No document is written in stone and changing circumstances call for adaptation and revision. The *Revised General Plan of Formation* is a witness to that reality. Since beginning work on the document, the Church has launched a major initiative to move us all towards greater synodality. While synodality is not mentioned by name, I think the reality is reflected throughout the document. I believe the overall vision of formation in the plan is sound and the document can serve as a useful handbook for Passionist formators.

The central idea around which the Plan is organized is the charism. This would seem to be a very positive and fruitful way of proceeding until someone asks: What is the charism? Volumes have been written in answer to that question. In the document, the charism is not presented as a “*something*” that is definable like a property or possession. It is not a fixed, immovable thing, given once for all. The charism is a gift of the Spirit; it is a living and dynamic reality written on our hearts (Jer. 31, 33; 2 Cor. 3, 3). It is the gift of God that is always new and renewing. From it flows the energy and creativity that enables the Congregation and its members to hear the call of God and to respond to the needs of God’s people in every time

and every place. The charism of the Passion, first given to St. Paul of the Cross, is the ever-new gift of God that gives us the understanding and love we need to play our part in the mission of the Church today. It is a spiritual reality that has to be discerned and interpreted again and again.

In short, the Passionist charism is not some disembodied unchanging ideal. The idea of charism that guides the Plan is the living tradition that began with Paul of the Cross. It gathers together all the ways Passionists throughout the world strive to embody for their day the great theological, spiritual and pastoral insights into the passion of Jesus that have inspired Passionists for three hundred years.

2. The World Today

We are living in a very precarious time with war and the threat of more war and the increasing isolation of nations and peoples. Despite the lessons of past wars and the recent pandemic, nations still find it hard to collaborate but cling to dangerous ideas of separation, isolation and hostility to others. Some of the former colonial powers are stirring up nationalist feelings of nostalgia for their glorious imperial past. In the face of an uncertain future, it is easier to indulge in sentimental nostalgia that foments old rivalries and hostilities. I'm afraid the world is drifting towards great danger.

In the face of these dangers, the Church has once again given voice to the hopes of all people. It has affirmed the unity of humanity as the family of God, where all are brothers and sisters with equal dignity as God's children. This has to be the core of our message to a world sliding towards greater division and conflict. There are evil forces at work in many places spreading rumors and fears that fill people with anxiety, anger and hatred. The Christian community has to resist this drift and announce with boldness the alternative vision of a humanity united in mercy, forgiveness, and love.

Within the Catholic Church there are also new divisions. The center of gravity of the Church is no longer Catholic Europe. Pope Francis is the first non-European Pope signaling that the Church of the future will not be a “*European*” Church. This is already causing great tensions within the Church with many groups in Europe and other continents longing for a restoration of the old, strong European Church with its Gregorian chants, Latin Mass and all the trappings of the European and colonial Catholic Church. This kind of nostalgia has little to do with Jesus and the Gospel and much more to do with the long history of European “*superiority*” and domination. The alliance between some Catholic integralists and white supremacy and racism is scandalous and frightening.

3. The Passionists

As a religious congregation in the Catholic Church, the Passionists have been given a share in the universal mission of the Church. It is important for us to be of one mind and heart with the Church today as it announces the Good News of the Kingdom in the particular conditions of our time. Synodality means that the whole people of God is walking together towards the Kingdom of God. It invites us to welcome others with their gifts. Passionists want to walk together with all Christians and people of good will. We want to share with them the gift of our charism and to be enriched by their many gifts. This is the way to be in mission in the world today.

Passionists have to resist the drift towards isolation and separation. The crisis of meaning today and the uncertainty about the future is tempting people everywhere to retreat into ghettos and to obsess about being different and needing a distinct identity. This is a new and more dangerous form of identity crisis that encourages sectarianism and suspicion of the other. This is not the way of Jesus and the Gospel.

It is in this world and Church that Passionists are called to make their missionary and evangelical contribution. We preach

Christ Crucified; he is the one who makes peace and reconciles people with God and with each other. As followers of Jesus, we do not accept that differences of language, nation, color or race should divide, separate, and cause conflict and violence. This is the false message of evil people. We preach Christ Crucified, the greatest source and instrument of peace for a divided and suffering world. We respond with energy and creativity to Jesus prayer “*that they may all be ONE*” (John 17).

This strong message has implications for us Passionists. I believe we have to be much more radical in our thinking. For too long we have allowed ourselves to drift along with the currents of nostalgia and the desire to maintain and restore the old structures whether in our communities or provinces. This is to be trapped in the past; it is not the way to the future. Maintenance and restoration need a huge investment of time, energy and personnel. This is not the most evangelical way to deploy our limited and decreasing resources.

One form of prophetic witness we can offer the Church and the world today is our international and multi-cultural identity and mission. Passionists living and working in international communities witness to the universal nature of the Church and challenge the local church to open to the wider world with its gifts and its needs. This is a particular need today when there is so much fear about migrants and tension with people of other cultures and beliefs. This kind of international living is necessary for the mission of the Congregation in today’s world.

4. Formation for a Synodal Church

What kind of formation that is suitable for a synodal Church? The traditional kind of seminary formation, mostly academic and separate from society does not seem to me to be at all suitable for the great challenges of today. Passionists are being invited to participate in a synodal Church on the move through history, collaborating with

all the faithful, and responding to the huge number of new and complex challenges facing people, society and the Church today. Formation today needs to be marked by a greater imagination, flexibility, and creativity.

Priests in the future will be working alongside and in collaboration with other members of the Church. The training should reflect this big change and be conducted in an environment of sharing and collaboration with other members of the Christian community as well as other Christians and members of other faiths. There has to be a strong emphasis on pastoral engagement as the proper setting for priestly training. Seminarians are training to be ministers of word and sacrament for the good of God's people. It is in the midst of God's people, learning about them and from them that future priests will gain the experience and expertise they need.

The missionaries of today and tomorrow will have to be gifted with the talents needed for this new kind of flexibility and creativity. The Church does not need young religious who want to stay at home or in the sacristy. More and more, the people are not coming to us and we have to move out to meet the people where they are. We cannot depend on people coming to our nice liturgies or well-organized events. The few faithful will continue to come but we are sent to all the people and have to go out to meet them where they are. Not everyone is suited for this new way of being a Passionist missionary in the world and therefore we need to be very clear about who we are, what we are about and the kind of candidate we need.

5. Formation for the International Congregation of the Passion

In recent times, the Congregation has become truly international and the presence of the charism is now firmly established in every continent. The ongoing process of restructuring the Congregation was undertaken for the purpose of revitalizing our life and ministry. Underlying this process was a new sense of

solidarity within the Congregation and a greater desire to feel, think and act more as a Congregation than as a series of isolated entities. Solidarity is a way of promoting the sense of belonging to an international and inter-dependent community that also respects the values of the local and the particular. The new spirit of solidarity is particularly important in embracing the new members from the developing parts of the Congregation.

The full and active participation in the life and mission of the Congregation today calls for a deepening of the spirit of solidarity and its concrete expression in structures and actions. One of the clearest and best expressions of solidarity for the Congregation today is for the entire Congregation to take responsibility for the wellbeing and future development of the worldwide Congregation.

One important way forward is to develop international centers of formation. International and multi-cultural formation has many benefits. Formation is “*for others*” and this highlights the call to see the needs of suffering people who are far away from one’s own place and immediate concerns. International formation is an experience of personal uprooting and widening of one’s horizon. It is an important part of the stretching of oneself that helps to free a young person and make him more flexible and sensitive to people other than his own. Moving outside one’s familiar world and allowing oneself to be challenged and to grow in compassion and service for “*strangers*” may be the decisive move in creating within him the new heart and mind of Christ.

The most effective way of pursuing this goal is for our novices and then the newly professed religious to come together in international centers of formation. In this way, they will come to know and appreciate the Congregation as a worldwide family. It will be a great support and encouragement to them to meet and know young Passionists from other continents and feel part of a living and dynamic body. They will see how the charism has been received into other cultures and discover more of its hidden riches. It will also give them the opportunity to learn new languages.

6. A Major Challenge facing Passionist Formation Today

To be a Passionist is to be a member of an international missionary congregation that calls for a relatively high level of education and preparation. Future Passionists will be leaders, teachers and have a prominent role in the local Christian community. They will need knowledge, skills, and wisdom if they are to serve the people with simplicity and humility. They will also need to demonstrate responsibility and transparency in the administration and management of their properties and belongings. They will be working side by side with the laity, other clergy and religious. This too will require training and skills. Passionists may also be called to serve the congregation as leaders locally or internationally. Some may be called to lead the local church as bishops. The congregation has the responsibility of providing the quality of education and formation that will equip our religious for a life of responsible and exemplary service.

It is clear that the quality of formation of our religious cannot be determined solely by the economic ability of the local entity. The quality of formation is determined by the responsibility of the congregation to provide well-trained religious and priests for the great mission of the Church. When the congregation agrees to accept young candidates it accepts the serious responsibility to train and prepare them well for service of God and God's people. This is a serious responsibility of the congregation and cannot be relativized because of the economic constraints of the local entity. It is the congregation that must shoulder the responsibility before God and the Church to provide well-trained and responsible priests and religious.

The inevitable conclusion is that the economic burden of the formation of our religious in the economically poorer parts of the congregation cannot be left to them to carry alone. The congregation must be asked to take collective responsibility for its future and

therefore for the formation of our new religious. This is something that has happened already in many religious congregations. It does not create a dependent mentality but rather lifts a huge burden and frees the new entities to focus on the growth and development of the congregation locally and the welfare of those already professed and working for God's people.

The Church and the Congregation are keen to answer the call of Lord, to read the signs of the times, and to respond to the needs of God's people and God's world today. We want to rededicate ourselves to providing our young with the best formation we can so that Passionist missionaries in every part of the world will be witnesses to the new creation and the new humanity that are the fruits of Jesus's saving death and resurrection.