

THE PASSIONISTS RESPOND TO THE CHALLENGES IN THE CHURCH AND WORLD TODAY

✠ The Church in Transition

As we ponder our present reality and how we are to proceed as an apostolic religious congregation, we first need to acknowledge that we are profoundly affected by the wider movement of change within the Church and the world. In particular, we need to accept that we are one of many Congregations that are experiencing the pull of the Spirit towards a new future. We then need to discern how, on the basis of our charism, we can make a worthwhile contribution to this movement and work together with others in the Church, clergy, religious and laity, for the good of the Church and the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God.

The Catholic Church is undergoing a difficult transition from a European and heavily clerical model of Church to something new. All the signs are that the new model will give greater recognition to the dignity and role of all the baptized. The laity will have a more prominent role in every aspect of Church life. The Church is now understood to be a community of believers with different ministries and roles all working together for the growth and flourishing of the Church and its mission of transforming the world into the Kingdom of God.

This new vision of the Church requires a new understanding of the nature and role of the ordained ministry and of the religious life and our contribution to the life and mission of the Church. For a long time, religious priests have adopted many of the characteristics and attitudes of clerical power and privilege. This has obscured their distinctive witness to the simplicity and joy of Christian discipleship. Religious are now being called to be the pathfinders for the new style of Church as the poor servant of the poor.

In every part of the Church, religious are asking themselves about their mission and role. They rejoice in all that they have contributed to God's people in the past and are wondering what God may be asking of them today and for the future. It is very obvious that the kinds of ministry and service offered in the past are not needed in the same way today. There are new needs and new opportunities calling for a



new response. The challenge is to move out from the old and familiar things of the past and to risk doing new things.

We are familiar with the history of religious life beginning with the desert fathers, followed by monasticism and the mendicants of the Middle Ages. The apostolic congregations were something new that prospered after the Council of Trent as a response to the Church's need to counter the advance of Protestantism and the new thinking that was weakening the Church.

The apostolic religious were also called upon to strengthen the Christian life of the faithful. Religious men and women dedicated themselves to the instruction of the faithful and especially of the children, as well as to the care of the poor and the suffering, and other works of mercy. The huge number of new congregations, present in almost every Catholic diocese, changed the face of the Church. Young men and women had new ways of expressing their religious piety and fervor. Many men religious were priests who served in religious churches where a whole variety of new popular devotions and exercises were taught to the people. It was at this time too that the great missionary activity of the Church took off with many missionaries, women and men, travelling from Europe to Asia, Africa and South America.

The apostolic congregations became a very important feature of the Catholic diaspora that emigrated from Europe to the Americas and Australia in the 19th and early 20th centuries. They opened parishes, built schools and taught the young; they cared for the sick and the old; they built hospitals and opened orphanages. They helped the newly arrived immigrants to make a new home in these new countries. Many new congregations were founded among the diaspora in the U.S., Canada and Australia.

The Church has always been fertile in producing forms of religious life that responded to the needs and circumstances of the time and place. It is likely that the same will happen in the future. The world is evolving away from the absolute power of former times. People want to be consulted and to be involved in the political and social reality that affects them. The same is true regarding the Church. The Church has declared that it wants the full, active and conscious participation of all the faithful in the life of the Church. This marks the end of the dualism of the active clergy and religious helping the passive receptive laity.

When we look back at the last 300 years, we see how most, if not all, of the charismatic and missionary energies of the Church were channeled through the religious congregations. They embodied and expressed both the contemplative and active missionary aspects of the Church. The praying, preaching, teaching,

educating, healing, and caring activities of the Church were contained within the great array of religious congregations. The vast masses of the laity were the recipients of the life and ministry of the clergy and the religious. They were largely passive and inactive.

Today the Church recognizes the dignity and mission of all the baptized and is calling on all Christians to live their baptismal dignity to the full and to be active participants and missionaries wherever they are. The Holy Spirit moves wherever she wills and gives talents and charisms to all the baptized to build up the Church and to spread the Kingdom of God. Religious are no longer the only recipients of the charisms or the only active members of the Church. This new vision of a missionary Church calls for a re-imagining of the place and role of the religious congregations in the universal and local church, and how they relate to and collaborate with the laity and the hierarchy. This work has not yet received the attention it needs.

For centuries, the religious life was attractive because it offered the only opportunities for men and women to be active and to serve others. That is no longer the case. There are now many new and attractive ways of expressing one's Christian dedication to serve others. Lay men and women are actively involved in their parishes, in religious organizations and NGOs all over the world. They can do this as single or married people; they can do it for a short or long time. These new ways of serving are much more flexible and more attractive than the classical religious life. The religious life will continue to exist but will attract much fewer vocations and may no longer be the principal way of expressing the service side of the Church.

The Passionists

The Congregation of the Passion is a community of religious that was founded in the 18th century. The structure and forms given to the congregation by St. Paul of the Cross had a particular historical origin and shape. They give us our particular place within the history of religious life in the Catholic Church. Today we have a deeper understanding and appreciation of the development of the religious life through the ages and especially the nature and role of the religious congregations in the last three centuries. We were founded at a particular moment in history and strongly stamped by the religious spirit of that age. The last three centuries have marked us profoundly.

The Catholic Church is slowly emerging from centuries of isolation from the modern world and hostility to everything in it it considered dangerous and false.

That was the climate in which we were founded and flourished. The great challenge for the Passionists now is to find the new forms and structures that will help us to respond to the needs, opportunities and challenges of the Church and the world today so that the message of the Cross can continue to be a source of healing, forgiveness and salvation.

In recent years, the Passionist congregation has been engaged in a radical form of restructuring in service of the revitalization of its life and mission. Structures are an essential support for the life and the healthy organization of the community. Structures are always a means and never an end in themselves. The new structures are an attempt to express a new vision of the congregation as a truly international and multicultural religious family.

The old structures of national and regional provinces were suitable for a national and regional mindset and ministry. A man joined the local province and ministered within its geographical boundaries for the rest of his life. There were exceptions as some were asked to go to the foreign missions. But the foreign missionaries were the minority. The old provinces were suited to a rather closed and limited world that was the norm before international travel, commerce and communication transformed the world.

The restructured congregation is inviting us to think and feel beyond the geographical limits of the old provinces and to embrace a wider and richer vision of the congregation as international and multicultural. We have just begun this journey. For now, we have only a few instances of a limited sharing of personnel between provinces to meet emergencies. A few international centers of formation have opened in response to local needs, but even these are under threat from a resurgence of a provincial mentality. So far there has not been any serious attempt to realize the new vision of the Passionists as a truly international and multicultural community.

✎ Major Challenge

The major challenge facing the whole world today is coming from a growing nationalism and intolerance of difference. The Church is experiencing the call to affirm the international and multicultural nature of the Christian community in the face of extreme forms of nationalism and xenophobia. In every part of the world, there is increasing suspicion, hatred and violence directed against people who are perceived as different on account of their nationality, color, and religious beliefs. Religious Congregations are in a privileged position to respond to this challenge. We have already felt the movement of the Spirit gently leading us in this new

direction but so far we have hesitated too much. We are still overly attached to the old structures, “the fleshpots of Egypt”, and find it hard to embrace the new vision and make the necessary changes.

Pope Francis on more than one occasion has called on religious to give a lead in witnessing against extreme nationalism and cultural elitism. The mission of the Church is to proclaim the Gospel and to promote the unity of humanity. This implies overcoming the suspicions and hostilities that divide people and threaten peace. The Christian community is open and welcoming to all. In it there can be no hostile division between Jews and Greeks, whites and blacks, rich and poor but all are equally loved and accepted as brothers and sisters. This is the message of the Gospel for today’s world. But words alone are not enough. We need to embody this Christian vision in our daily options and in our communities.

Passionists can respond to the signs of the times and the promptings of the Spirit by working more energetically to create truly international and multicultural communities that will witness to the Kingdom of God and seek new forms of ministry to the most neglected and disadvantaged people in society. Words alone will not be enough to bring the Gospel to the world. We have to design a way of life that witnesses to the Christian vision of a new world in words and practical ways of living. An important first step will be the creation of international and multicultural communities of Passionists who share faith in Christ crucified and risen, and have a common commitment to love Christ crucified in his people today. This will not happen spontaneously because of the pull of gravity towards the familiar and the comfortable. Leadership and direction are needed to encourage and facilitate this needed movement.

The world needs the witness of multicultural living. This prophetic project faces a number of difficulties. Within the community, there will be a diversity of languages, cultural sensibilities, ways of seeing and doing. The community will have to agree on a common language for daily use, the kind of liturgy, as well as ordinary things like food. Each one must feel included and at home; no one should feel excluded. Communication is the life-blood of community life. The community will be challenged every day to deepen the level of communication, mutual understanding and collaboration among the members.

Pope Francis has called for the creation of a culture of encounter and dialogue. Dialogue is the life-blood of Christian community life. Passionist multicultural communities that are characterized by dialogue are a powerful witness to our belief in the dignity of every human person made in the image and likeness of God. Our communities can be schools of understanding and compassion where differences

of language, color and culture are welcomed and cherished. We can be a light to the world where fear of the other leads to suspicion, rejection and violence.

The multicultural community is a community on mission to God's people. The religious will have to find ways of being close to the local people and of serving the poorest members of the local community and those who are suffering. This may also be challenging today because of the widespread hostility to foreigners. Many of the religious will be foreigners and may face hostility, suspicion and even rejection. The witness of dedicated service is the surest way of winning the hearts of the people.

Discipleship of Jesus is always an adventure that brings us into new territory as we walk the roads of life with Jesus. The particular challenges of this time are associated with the growing tensions between peoples, nations, and religions. Jesus came to knock down the barriers dividing people and to gather the whole of humanity into the one family of God (Col. 1, 20). Our mission today is to witness to this great Gospel vision of all people "from every tribe and tongue and nation" (Rev. 5, 9) united as brothers and sisters under the one God, the Father of us all. We want to affirm the unity of humanity and the beauty of our common home, planet earth. The ravaging and exploitation of the earth for the benefit of a few has contributed enormously to the poverty and suffering of many. Our commitment to the poor and suffering of the world implies a commitment also to the care of the earth and its flourishing for the good of all.

✠ Our Contribution to the Renewal of the Church

One of the major contributions religious can make to the evolving Church is as witnesses to the vitality and joy of Christian discipleship. They can help the laity to discover, claim and live their baptismal and missionary identity to the full. It will mean a new relationship of equality with the laity that is based on a spirit of dialogue and collaboration. More time and effort will be devoted to affirming and facilitating the mission of the laity and encouraging their active involvement in every aspect of church life. It will no longer be an unequal relationship of active religious helping the passive recipient laity.

The Passionists will contribute their particular insights and strengths to this new venture. We will continue to point to the Passion as the extraordinary source of new life for all people and for the whole world and help the laity to make this vision their own.

Ours is a way of life that demands a thorough knowledge of the meaning and power of the passion and death of Jesus. This calls for more profound study and research leading to a deeper knowledge of the Gospel and the tradition of the Church. A serious commitment to study on the part of all the members is called for.

Passionists choose to be close to Jesus who continues to suffer in all who are hungry, thirsty, naked, persecuted, abandoned, and afflicted in any way. We touch the wounds of Jesus when we minister to the poor and suffering of the world.

Passionists are a community of believers in the midst of the Church who witness to the power of the Cross to break down barriers of misunderstanding, doubt and suspicion that separate people and to create instead a new human family of fellowship and service.

The Passionist vocation requires a strong spiritual life of prayer and the practice of the Christian virtues especially charity. Here the example and teaching of St. Paul of the Cross and other spiritual masters is essential.

Passionists will be the first to break free of the old forms of clericalism and the emphasis on clerical power and privilege. They will be the first to model a form of ministry that is simple, collaborative, and humble. They will find new ways of serving God's people that witness to the humility and service of Jesus.

The call to model a new kind of priestly ministry will be helped by working more closely with the laity in the local Church. This will help us to take our distance from the clerical culture. Another help in moving in this new direction will be the international and multicultural nature of religious communities. These communities will witness to the essential Christian vocation to be open and welcoming to people from beyond the boundaries of one's nation, language group and culture.

Passionist formation is already responding to these new challenges and will intensify its efforts by designing programs of international and multicultural formation where young men from the different continents can meet, share life and study together and grow in the ability for dialogue, empathy and mutual understanding.