



2024

Lenten Message and Reflection

from the Superior General to the Passionist Family

MY DEAR BROTHERS, SISTERS AND FRIENDS IN THE PASSIONIST FAMILY,

Greetings of peace and hope of God's closeness to you all!

Once again, we are confronted by the special season of **Lent**, during which we hear the call to ongoing conversion (*metanoia*), by which we are challenged to turn away from sin and choose to grow closer to God by loving Him and loving our neighbor as ourselves. The Gospel passage which is given at the beginning of Lent each year as a roadmap for our Lenten journey, places before our attention: **prayer, almsgiving, and fasting** as means by which we can love God and our neighbor as ourselves (cf. Mt. 6:1-6,16-18). This season is filled with the promise of new opportunities and new beginnings, powered by God's grace and presence. Let us seize this precious moment. As St. Paul urges: *"...we urge you not to let your acceptance of God's grace come to nothing. As God said, 'At the time of my favor, I have answered you; on the day of salvation, I have helped you'. Well, now is the real time of favor; now the day of salvation is here."* (2Cor. 6:1-2).



In this Lenten message, I would like to focus and share some reflections with you on the subject of **PRAYER**, particularly since Pope Francis has announced this year to be a **Year of Prayer**, in preparation for the Jubilee Year next year (2025).

Lent is an opportunity for our spiritual formation and discipline. To seize this opportunity, we need to be led and guided by the Spirit who facilitates our encounter with God. Like Jesus, we want to respond by accepting the call to go into the 'desert', driven by the Spirit (Mt. 4:1-13; Lk. 4:1-11). God is waiting for us, expecting us, offering us a time of restoration...a time of RETREAT...the chance for a fresh start in the spiritual life (cf. Hosea 2:16-17). The goal of this time is to seek and find the will of God over and beyond all the movements of our heart. St. Ignatius of Loyola says that two things are needed for this: i) **magnanimity**, i.e. a wide and open mind which is not confined to narrow horizons of small interests, and ii) **generosity**, i.e. the readiness to give without conditions and limits.

“Lent is an occasion, not so much for increased time given to prayer, as for a different prayer: a prayer with that distinctive flavor which arises from a realization of who I am ‘in Christ’, the unlimited potential in me for growth into Christ, and the possibility of achieving it because of his power as risen Lord.”

~ Gregory Manly, CP/Anneliese Reinhard, MSC



Driven by the Spirit, God's intention in the 'desert' is not to punish us but to purify us. In the desert, God will want to purify us of any excessive attachment we may have to consolation in prayer. If in prayer God blesses us with a lot of consolation ("spiritual highs"), there is a danger that we may seek and love *“the consolations of our God more than the God of our consolations”*, said St Teresa of Avila. In general, prayer in the desert will become less of us, and more of God.

The following are good indicators that our experience of 'spiritual desert' (dryness in prayer) is the purifying work of God:

- + If during the time of dryness, we remain faithful to prayer.
- + If our prayer is honest and flowing from the real stuff of our lives.
- + If we are trying to integrate prayer and life.
- + If we are trying to live a life of charity.
- + If our prayer is helping us to be more loving.
- + If we are genuinely trying to avoid sin and live our lives according to God's Word.
- + If we thirst, yearn, and have a desire for God as we walk in the desert.

As Jesus was led into the desert by the Spirit (Mt. 4:1) to face the great issues of his life and mission before he entered into his ministry, so also, we too enter into this Lenten time to face the great issues of our life – God's invitations and the evil attractions and allurements. In the **solitude** of the desert, we are meant to find the clarity and firmness which we shall need in the turmoil of actual life.

We read in all the gospels that Jesus would withdraw to deserted places and pray. While prayer was a common practice of his culture, Jesus nevertheless sought times of quiet, times of solitude. For any Christian who aspires toward union with God, SOLITUDE holds an extremely important place in life in that it is a pre-requisite for the communion one must keep both with God and with other people. Christian solitude is never a solitude *from* people, but a solitude *for* people.

“The desert
does not mean the absence of people,
it means the presence of God.”
~ Carlo Carretto

The Trappist monk, Thomas Merton said: *“It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers...Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say.”* ~ *The Sign of Jonas*





As Passionists, we know that one of the pillars upon which our Congregation is founded by St. Paul of the Cross, is **solitude**. For Paul, solitude was a cyclic journey *into his human heart (self), to the Divine Heart (God), to every human heart (others)*. It is linked to a call to community and evangelization. In a letter written to Canon Felice Pagliari in 1768, Paul of the Cross wrote:

“Our Congregation is established on this foundation...the vocation which God has given to her...our Rule obliges us after missions, retreats etc. to withdraw immediately into the Retreats of our solitude in order to recollect our spirit in prayer and fasting. Believe me, an evangelical worker who is a man of prayer, a friend of solitude and detached from all created things accomplishes more than a thousand others who are not such men...”

~ L III, 13 February 1768

Lent gives us the opportunity to **re-encounter prayer** which brings us face-to-face with God who already delights in us. Prayer is an **encounter with God**. The goal and mentality of prayer is not success or conquest, but **surrender**. The goal is to give oneself away completely and to remember how much the Lord will love you when you fail and try again. I offer you this Prayer for Lent composed by St. Ambrose of Milan (339 - 397):

O Lord, who has mercy upon all,
take away from me my sins,
and mercifully kindle in me
the fire of Thy Holy Spirit.
Take away from me the heart of stone,
and give me a heart of flesh,
a heart to love and adore Thee,
a heart to delight in Thee,
to follow and enjoy Thee,
for Christ's sake. Amen.



May these reflections assist your Lenten journey and enrich your preparation and participation in the celebration of the Paschal Mystery of Christ. **May the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ be always in your heart.**

Fraternally,

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "J. Rego, C.P.".

~ Fr. Joachim Rego, C.P.
Superior General