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THE SACRED HEART .

# THE PASSIONIST NUN AND THE “CRUCIFIED OF TODAY”

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There is no denying it: we live in a suffering, a crucified world. Each story we hear on the news, or which comes to us through prayer requests, is more heart-rending than the next. The global COVID-19 pandemic has only served to worsen the pre-existing anguish of humanity, adding a new layer of fear, insecurity, and grief to an already crushing burden of suffering. Truly, the world has never been more in need of what we as Passionists can offer. A Passionist priest and friend of our community has told us how the men and women he meets in his ministry are aching to find meaning in their pain, begging for the deeply-needed message

of redemptive suffering enshrined in our charism. When God became man, He did not eliminate suffering, but He did something far greater – He made it the very means of our salvation and of our cooperation in the salvation of others. What was once the greatest curse of humanity has now become, paradoxically, our greatest treasure.

But what can we as cloistered Passionist Nuns do in the face of the world’s enormous suffering? We, too, have received the charism of St. Paul of the Cross, but we are called to exercise it in a uniquely contemplative way. We do not travel and preach missions, but our hidden life of prayer is just as essential in the apostolic work of the Church as she addresses the needs of modern man. As our Constitutions say, we “are certain of contributing ‘to the fullness of the Church’s presence’ to mankind.” (Const. 4) In this essay, I plan to explore one element of our charism that I consider particularly important for our day and age, an element that has been deeply meaningful for me: the concept of the “contemporary Passion.”

The Passionist Fathers often speak and write about the “crucified of today,” that is, those suffering persons in whom Christ is mysteriously, mystically renewing His Pas-

sion. Our priests thus consider service to the poor and afflicted a true element of our charism, since “whatever you did for one of these least brothers of Mine, you did for Me.” (Matt, 25:40) This concept expresses itself differently in the contemplative branch of our Congregation, perhaps at times receiving less emphasis because we do not usually conduct an external apostolate of service.

However, I feel that Passionist Nuns have a particularly special role to play here, one which ties in beautifully with our contemplative vocation.

St. Paul of the Cross bequeathed to his daughters a uniquely apostolic spirit, giving us the same Passion Vow as the priests and Brothers of the Congregation.

By delving deeper into the the “contemporary Passion,” we can awaken and strengthen this spirit in a new way.

Among the options for the essential fulfillment of our Passion Vow, our Constitutions



+ Nuns of the Passion of Jesus Christ.

list the following: “To give particular attention to Jesus, who continues His contemporary Passion in all who suffer, especially the sisters of their own community.” (Const. 14d) Clearly, this is something the Church – who has approved these Constitutions and thereby lent her own authority to them – sees as important for her Passionist daughters. So how can we more deeply enter into this mystery?

I would say that there are really two ways in which Christ re-lives His Passion today: in the members of His Mystical Body, and in all of humanity. The first way is quite familiar to us from such Scripture passages as Galatians 2:19 (“*I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me*”) and Colossians 1:24 (“*In my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of His Body, which is the Church.*”) Through Baptism we are radically configured to Jesus Crucified and Risen, and when embraced with love, our sufferings truly become one with His. Whenever we hear of Christians being persecuted for their faith, or heroically bearing great suffering, we as Passionist Nuns can contemplate Christ offering Himself once again in these men and women of the Church. As the Constitutions mention, of course, we can see this most clearly in the Sisters with whom we live. I cannot tell you how many times I personally have been edified and touched to see the patience, humility, and love of the suffering Jesus shining forth through one of my Sisters who is undergoing some great trial!

The second way Jesus re-lives His Passion is more difficult to grasp – how can we say that He suffers in those who are outside of His Mystical Body? This is certainly a great mystery, one that we will never fully understand this side of Heaven, but we can begin to see how this is the case by considering the



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nature of the Incarnation and the Redemption. “*For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man*” (Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*). Furthermore, when He died on the Cross and rose from the dead, He also did so on behalf of all. So even though His union with the baptized is more perfect (and it is our mission as the Church to bring everyone into this union!), He nonetheless is truly united to – and

thus can suffer in – every man and woman on earth. God has granted some Saints, such as Mother Teresa of Calcutta, a special insight into this reality. Even though they may not be aware of the meaning of their suffering, non-Christians are still in some mysterious way connected to the Suffering Christ. As such, they can and should be drawn into the scope of our Passion prayer.

With all this in mind, how in a practical way can we Passionist Nuns bring the Mystical Body and all mankind into our contemplation of the Suffering Christ? There are, of course, many different ways in which we can open our hearts to the “*crucified of today*,” but I believe they can be summarized in two categories: intercession and presence.

Intercession is something with which all nuns are intimately familiar. Prayer requests from across the world pour into our monasteries, and even those who do not share our faith seem to have an intuition of the power of a contemplative’s prayers. As Passionists, an intercessory image particularly dear to us is that of bringing souls to the foot of the Cross. How much more should we be moved to do so when we consider those in whom Christ continues His Passion today? We can beg Him to unite their anguish with His, to show them the profound meaning of their suffering, to strengthen them in trial, and, if it be His Will, to lessen the burden of their crosses. I personally find it fruitful to make the Stations of the Cross into a special prayer for people whose unique sufferings Jesus is sharing in a particular Station. For instance, I might offer the first Station for priests unjustly accused of abuse, the fourth Station for mothers with terminally ill children, the ninth Station for those feeling utterly crushed by addictions, etc.

But beyond intercession, there is another way in which we can bring the “*crucified of today*” into our prayer – the apostolate of presence. There are times in life when a pain runs so deep that words and even actions fall short. It is at such times that the apostolate of presence shines forth. We sit and weep with a grieving friend, not seeking to offer platitudes or even to ask what we can do, but simply being with that person. Passionist Nuns have a special devotion to our Sorrowful Mother, the “*valiant woman*” standing

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(Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*).

beneath the Cross of her Son. Ever since our foundation nearly 250 years ago, we have felt a profound connection between Mary's role and ours. We, like Our Lady of Sorrows, are called to remain on Calvary with the Crucified Jesus, giving Him consolation and love by our presence.

The same is true when we consider those in whom Christ is suffering today. As cloistered nuns, we can be particularly aware of our powerlessness to relieve the sufferings of the world, but for that very reason we must continually recommit ourselves to remaining a silent, consoling presence beneath the crosses of all humanity.

This call to be mystically present to those who suffer is not an easy vocation by any means; it calls for a disciplined and loving commitment, a persevering recollection and constant renewal of fervor. However, this is not a burden, but rather a grace, the grace of spiritual motherhood. I had an experience of this one day as I recalled how, in the world, I used to sometimes pray with a group outside an abortion clinic. Eventually, we would all finish the Rosary and have to leave, and even though I knew that we couldn't stay there all day, I always got the feeling that I was *"abandoning my post."* After entering the monastery, however, I realized that now I can always remain *"at my post,"* spiritually standing beside the crosses of the innocent children whose lives are taken every day around the world. Our vows themselves can even be seen as consecrating us to this mission of presence. Take, for instance, # 40 in our Constitutions, on the vow of enclosure: *"They joyfully accept their separation from the world also to sustain those in our society who are isolated or overlooked in a solitude which has been imposed."* How this rings especially true in these times of pandemic, when so many have been forced into solitude by reason of illness or age!

To sum up all of this, I believe that the concept of the *"contemporary Passion"* ought to be a particularly dear one to Passionist Nuns. We do not usually encounter the *"crucified of today"* in person, but we are called to remain close to them in prayer – closer than any apostolic laborer ever could! Let us embrace with joy and dedication our special vocation to contemplate the Paschal Mystery, both in Christ Himself and in all those through

whom He continues His Passion today. The One Whom we see in agony today is the one we hope to embrace in glory tomorrow – in communion with all redeemed mankind! +

