

FORMATION AND CATECHESIS

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The Signs of the
Congregation
Habit, Sign,
Crucifix, Rosary

Paul Francis Spencer, C.P.

Jubilaevum

This Jubilee Year celebrates three hundred years since the founding of the Passionists, but in fact the Passionists were founded in a very strange way: there was a Passionist charism before there was a Passionist community, a Rule was written down before anyone had lived it, and a Habit was seen before anyone had worn it. In the case of the Passionists, the founding process happened by signs rather than designs, which is why Saint Paul

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of the Cross can truthfully say that the Congregation of the Passion is God's work, not his own.

In a stark and unromantic way, our Constitutions describe for us the habit of the Passionists: ***The distinctive habit of religious of the Congregation is a black tunic, a belt, and the sign of the Passion. Religious wear the habit as a sign of their consecration and as a witness to poverty. (Constitutions 102)***

However, if we want to reflect on the deeper meaning of the "signs" of our Congregation, we have to return to the inspiration which preceded the legislation. For Paul of the Cross, the black habit and the sign came to light not through a legal process, a discussion during a general chapter or even a time of living and working in a particular way. Paul himself describes where these "signs" came from in a text he wrote in 1720 during his Castellazzo retreat. These signs of our identity began with an inspiration and an inner experience.

In the Preface to the First Rule, Paul describes how he had an "inspiration to withdraw into solitude". He tells us that "this inspiration, accompanied by great tenderness of heart, was given me by the good God" and immediately he goes on to speak for the first time of a habit which would be an expression of the inspiration he had received: "At

the same time I had the idea of wearing a poor black tunic of coarse cloth called arbagio, the ordinary wool fabric found in these parts, of going barefoot, of living in very deep poverty – in short, by God's grace, leading a penitential life. This never again left my heart."

Paul carried this inspiration in his heart until the day when, returning from Mass in the Capuchin church in Castellazzo, he had an inner experience which would confirm for him what God was bringing about in him and through him. He tells us: ***At that moment I saw myself clothed in a long black garment with a white cross on my breast, and below the cross the holy name of Jesus was written in white letters. At that instant I heard these very words spoken to me: 'This signifies how pure and spotless that heart should be which must bear the holy name of Jesus graven upon it'. On seeing and hearing this I began to weep and then it stopped.***

When he sees the black habit with what we now know as the Passionist Sign, Paul begins to weep. We know from his Castellazzo diary that tears are Paul's response to the overwhelming love of God revealed to him in the Passion of Jesus. The experience is too profound to be expressed in words; tears are for him the only adequate response. Shortly afterwards, he again sees the tunic presented to him "with the holy name of Jesus and the cross all in white, but the tunic was black". This time he embraces the invitation of God which it represents: "I pressed it joyfully to my heart".

The habit and sign, given to him through an inspiration and an inner experience, are bearers of meaning both for Paul and his brothers and for those to whom they will minister. He explains this to us in the text of the Rule which he wrote during his Castellazzo retreat: ***Dearly beloved, you must know that the main object in wearing black (according to the special inspiration that God gave me) is to be clothed in mourning for the Passion and Death of Jesus. For this purpose let us never forget to have always with us a constant and sorrowful remembrance of him. And so let each of the Poor of Jesus take care to instill in others meditation on the suffering of our Jesus.***

Today as Passionists, we often forget that we were founded to teach people how to pray. We become caught up in so many other important ministries; having spent most of my religious life as a parish priest, I know this from my own experience. But I





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love this extract from Paul's first Rule, because it reminds me of what has to remain always at the heart of who I am and what I do: I am called to be clothed in the remembrance of the suffering love of Jesus and to bring that love to those who struggle to find God in their own suffering. A Passionist is someone who has come to know God's love through contemplating the Passion and who is able to help others to experience that love in their own lives.

We find this twofold compassion in the Spiritual Diary of St Paul of the Cross, compassion for the suffering Jesus and compassion for his suffering people: My sole desire is to be crucified with Jesus. (23 November) At holy Communion I was particularly recollected, especially in a sorrowful and loving remembrance of the sufferings of my Jesus. (8 December) I felt that I would die when I saw the loss of so many souls who do not experience the fruit of the Passion of my Jesus. (4 December) I asked God to accept me as the least and lowest servant of his poor. (7 December)

We are neither monks nor merely missionaries. Rather, we are people who place the Cross at the centre of our lives: a Cross which we contemplate in prayer and whose presence we are then able to recognise in our own lives and in the lives of others. The words spoken in our Rite of First Profession when we receive that other great sign of our Congregation, the Crucifix, remind us of this: Receive, my dear brother, the image of Jesus Christ nailed to the cross. Contemplate him frequently so that you may learn to show forth the Word of the Cross constantly in yourself and to be a witness of it to others, so that you may attain the eternal fruit of the Paschal Mystery.

The title of this reflection includes the rosary among the signs of our Congregation. Although the rosary has never been an official part of our Passionist habit, it reminds us of Mary's place in our Passionist life. We know from Father John Mary Cioni that when Paul received the vision of the habit and the sign, "he had not seen Mary with bodily eyes, although he had been aware of her and understood that she was present" (Processi vol.1, p.38). In our own lives also, that same presence of Mary accompanies us as we walk the way of compassion. May she, who shared in the sufferings of Jesus on Calvary and welcomed the beloved disciple as her son, teach us how to live that twofold compassion with tenderness of heart.

Questions for Reflection

Which of the four signs speaks to you most? How does the Passionist sign inspire you today? In what way do you feel clothed in the remembrance of the suffering love of Jesus? How does the Crucifix remind you that the Cross is at the centre of your life?

(The Questions for Reflection were written by Patricia Carroll who is a member of the Passionist Companions, the lay movement in St Patrick's Province.)

