

Founders & Foundresses

BY ANNE TSCHANZ

St. Paul of the Cross —*Bold Preacher of Christ Crucified*

One of the greatest mystics and spiritual directors the Church has ever known is St. Paul of the Cross, founder of the Congregation of the Passion, otherwise known as the Passionists. From the halls of the Papal Palace to the humble dwellings of the poor, he preached Jesus Crucified. In our time, when people flee from suffering and pain as the most dreadful evil, Paul embraced the Cross, suffering every hardship for love of Him who made every hardship “sweet.”

A Hidden Vocation in the Heart

Paul Francis Daneo was born in 1694 in Ovada in what is now Italy, the oldest of sixteen children, only six of whom survived infancy. His father was a businessman while his mother instilled in him a deep devotion to the Passion of Christ. When he was a young adult, a simple homily resulted in a deep conversion experience. He vowed to live a “holy and perfect life.”

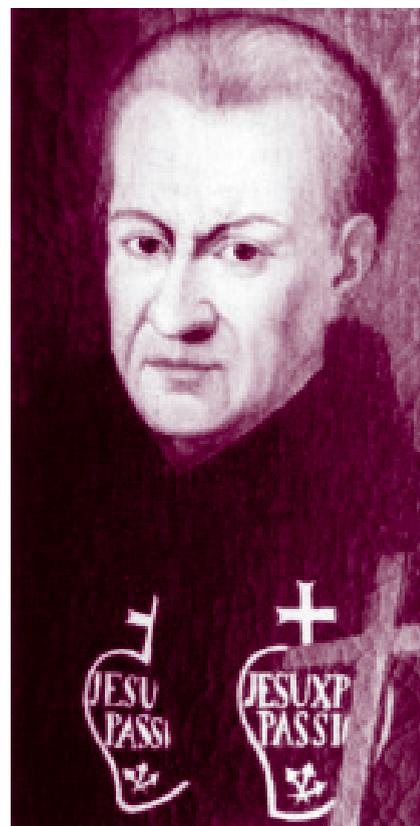
He “kept this vocation hidden in my heart” but he was more and more drawn to solitude and a penitential life, desiring to wear a “black tunic, go barefoot and live in radical poverty.” He was still involved with the family business so he waited for God to show him the way. In 1718, the Blessed Mother gave him the understanding that he would gather

a group of companions together to live a life centered on the Passion of Jesus Christ.

His uncle meanwhile wanted him to marry and become his heir. But in 1720, while walking home after attending Mass, Paul saw himself “clothed in 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 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.”

It was one thing to join a monastery and to live a penitential life; it was quite another thing to start a new order from the ground up. After the bishop clothed him as a hermit, Paul moved into a small room next to a church to begin a forty day period of fasting, prayer and reflection during which he wrote the Rule of the institute he felt called to establish, “as quickly as if someone was dictating to me.”

After this retreat, the bishop assigned him as a custodian of a small hermitage. Among the poor in the area, there was a lack of the knowledge of the fundamentals of the Faith, so he preached and gave retreats. He said, “I would die when I saw the loss of so many souls who do



not experience the fruit of the Passion of my Jesus.” He also traveled through the streets with a cross and bell, calling all parents to send their children to catechism classes. When he saw a crowd of youngsters behind him “my heart was so jubilant that I was forced to restrain my tears.”

Long Journey to Rome

After many delays, the bishop finally gave the Rule his cautious endorsement. Setting off by ship in 1721 to present the new Rule to the pope, Paul got his first glimpse of Monte Argentario, a majestic, wild peak that captivated him. The last forty-three miles of the journey to Rome was done on foot, ending with a dusty, barefoot and bareheaded Paul presenting himself at the Quirinal Palace, home of Pope Innocent XIII. Without credentials, he was rudely turned away.

Paul wrote, “you must cry out continually to the Sacred Heart of our Divine Lover, ‘Thy will be done.’” Immediately he turned to Our Lady and walked to St. Mary Major, where he knelt and professed for the first time the Passionist vow to keep the memory of the Passion alive in his own heart and in the hearts of the faithful. Returning to Monte Argentario to see if he could establish a hermitage there, his attire and holy demeanor subjected him to all sorts of insults and misfortunes, including an infestation of lice.

But on the mount he found an abandoned hermitage where he could begin a life of solitude with his brother, John Baptist. For a year, they taught Sunday catechism classes until an invitation came to engage in a more expanded apostolate. Moving on again to the diocese of Troia, Paul found a friend in Bishop Cavalieri, uncle of St. Alphonsus Ligouri. With the Bishop’s help, Paul was able to meet with Pope Benedict XIII who immediately granted them verbal permission to gather companions into a new institute.



They worked for a while in a hospital while in Rome, seemingly a sidetrack from their apostolate, but it was here that Pope Benedict ordained them priests in 1727. They returned to Monte Argentario to resume their life of prayer, solitude, and catechetical work with the poor. But after the Bishop asked him to conduct a parish mission in 1730, Paul embraced an apostolate that would consume him for the rest of his life: to give the people a strong moral foundation and a love for the Passion of Christ as the answer to their ills.

A Work Guided by God

Formal approval for his Rule of life was finally granted by Pope Benedict XIV in 1741. As seen by his “puny and darkened intelligence,” it

seemed to Paul that “this work has been guided by God in a way incomprehensible to me.” Even the heart insignia was approved, “the great sign of salvation, terrible to all hell.” A month later, the first profession ceremony for eight men took place. The following year, vocations came and went, for the life of prayer, penance, solitude and poverty was difficult. But by the end of 1743, Paul made plans to build more “Retreats” because there were so many vocations.

As one writer pointed out, all of Paul’s homes seemed to be built in the dead of winter, when cold, hunger and drafty, unfinished buildings almost caused the death of them. There were boundary disputes, complaints from other congregations who worried about donations being taken away from them, and jealous people who spread false rumors. At one point they were ordered to stop new construction and to demolish any homes too close to other mendicant orders. Paul called the Passionists to “battle stations,” armed with “prayers, mortifications and above all exact observance of the religious Rule to obtain victory from the Most High.”

Finally, in 1750, a papal commission ruled in favor of the Passionists. And as obstacles were endured and embraced, vocations came. Paul wrote, “You think what is happening is opposed to your good. On the contrary...they are designed by your loving Spouse for your own good.” And also, “where there are crosses, there will be crowns in Paradise.” He adored in “all things the unfathomable judgments of the most loving and hidden designs of our Heavenly Father, from whose most holy hands we must accept everything with love.”

St. Paul of the Cross

Born: 1694 in Ovada, Italy

Ordained: 1727

Founded the Passionists: 1741

Founded the Passionist Nuns: 1771

Died: 1775

Canonized: 1867 by Pope Pius IX

Mission: To proclaim God’s love for the world revealed through the Passion of Jesus Christ.

Motto: May the Passion of Jesus Christ be always in our hearts.



In the meantime, Paul continued with his work. It is thought that he wrote over 20,000 letters in his lifetime, often with the familiar refrain “written in haste.” He conducted over 250 missions of eight-day’s duration or longer and he used all the senses to capture the people’s attention, for example, a penitential procession using a cross, skull and chains. One man said, “It was like Judgment Day.”

Preaching the Call to Holiness

Like St. Francis de Sales, Paul believed that everyone was called to holiness but each in one’s own distinct way, suited to one’s call in life. He counseled a wealthy woman not to “not omit holy prayer, spiritual reading, and the exercise of virtue, especially of holy obedience, humility and meekness. Then do not doubt that God will make you all His—to say it in one word—a saint.” As a young man, Paul inflicted severe penances on himself but he told a successful businessman: “As to penances, be content with what God gives you. These are infinitely better than those we take on ourselves.”

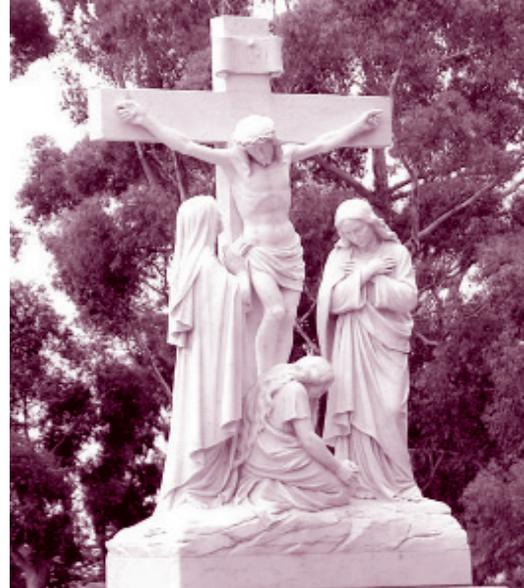
For those who felt no joy in prayer but rather experienced aridity, he wrote, it is “a sign that God wants you to pray more in faith...and with greater purity of intention, stripped of every self-satisfaction.” Even in the midst of distractions, “God is wholly within you, outside you, in your heart, in your soul, in your body, in every place—the heavens and earth are full of His Divine Majesty!”

Throughout the day, he advised the frequent use of spontaneous prayers to “enter into the heart of Jesus in spirit.” Words such as “O dear Jesus! O sweet Spouse of my soul! Look on this poor sinner!” Even while working, we can stay “in

the Presence of God” by means of faith so that even when we do not think about God “by the power of your original intention you will have worked with merit.” To a nun writing about her spiritual trials, he wrote, “The pain you experience is no trick; be grateful for it to the one who sends it....Remember, for this divine work to be secure, you must pass through the gate that is Jesus Christ our Lord and His holy sufferings, which are completely a work of love.”

Paul often talked about his own unworthiness in very dramatic language. “I am a swamp that exudes nothing but a pestilential stench.” When he heard that the Holy Father was coming to visit him he said, “What? The Vicar of Christ coming to visit the least son of Holy Church?” and another time, regarding spiritual direction, “I couldn’t direct an ant.” As one biographer said, we have to remember that Paul “was talking about himself in the blinding light of God.”

Throughout his life, he was plagued by illness: sciatica, arthritis, malaria, and a heart condition. Often he was bedridden for months at a time but “through the mercy of our good God, I know that I do not desire to know anything else, nor to taste any consolation. I desire only to be crucified with Jesus.” Paul told one of his spiritual daughters that on Good Friday, the sorrows of Jesus and Mary were impressed upon his heart, caus-



ing three of his ribs to expand, a fact later verified by his doctors.

Near the end of Paul’s life, Pope Clement XIV, who called Paul his “father,” issued a papal bull giving the Passionists the same rights and privileges as other congregations. Now Paul could establish the women’s branch of the Passionists he long desired. The Pope also gave as a gift to Paul the church of Saints John and Paul on the Celian Hill, now the Generalate. It was here that Paul died in 1775, telling the Passionists in his last Testament to remember the words of Jesus: “In this shall all know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Paul wrote: “I want you to know the soul makes its lofty flight to God on the wings of faith and in the fire of love. This flight is made through the door of Christ, our Lord, who humbled Himself to suffer the Passion, the greatest and most astounding work of God’s love.”

