



Engaging Aging

Passionists and Aging

By Reverend Donald Senior, C.P.

In his book *Let us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, Pope Francis reflects on the impact of the pandemic and how we might respond as followers of Jesus. The Pope uses the classical Catholic social action process - "Observe, Judge, Act" - as a way of analyzing what the world is experiencing, but translates these terms into his own phrasing of "contemplate," "discern," and "propose." The term "contemplate" for the Pope means both looking deeply into reality to discover the truth and listening intently to the voices of those around us, particularly the voices that are often marginalized and ignored. "This is," he notes, "a time for integrity, for exposing the selective morality of ideology, and for embracing the full implications of what it means to be children of God." (p. 35)

The Pandemic and the Elderly

Among the "signs of the times" (another classic biblical phrase the Pope invokes) that such contemplation reveals is "the exclusion and isolation of the elderly." (p. 58) A substantial number of those who died from COVID-19 were residents of nursing homes. In many cases, the vulnerability of the elderly to the threat of the pandemic was not just because of their age and physical condition but was linked to the deplorable state of the institutions

*"For the love
of God is very
ingenious,
and is proved
not so much
by the words,
as by the
deeds and
examples of
the lovers."*

*St. Paul of
the Cross*

Rule of 1775, XVI



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in which they were housed: “underfunded, neglected, dependent on a high turnover of poorly paid workers.”

The ideals of our faith and Scriptures are a strong challenge to such neglect. A famous passage from the prophet Joel cited by Peter at the first Pentecost foresees a future in which God will pour out the Spirit on the people and “Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.” (Joel 2:28) Ideally, the elderly are to be cherished within our families; their wisdom and contributions honored.

The Bible’s wisdom literature such as Sirach and Proverbs speak frequently of the need to respect the elderly and to treat them with special care and consideration. A famous passage from chapter 3 of the Book of Sirach (NRSV translation) counsels respect and care for one’s parents, including when they are elderly:

Children, listen to me, your father;
act accordingly, that you may be safe.
For the Lord sets a father in honor over
his children and confirms a mother’s au-
thority over her sons.
Those who honor their father atone for
sins;
they store up riches who respect their
mother.
Those who honor their father will have
joy in their own children,
and when they pray they are heard.
Those who respect their father will live a
long life;
those who obey the Lord honor their
mother.
My son, be steadfast in honoring your
father;
do not grieve him as long as he lives.

Even if his mind fails, be considerate of
him;
do not revile him because you are in your
prime.
Kindness to a father will not be forgotten;
it will serve as a sin offering - it will take
lasting root.
In time of trouble it will be recalled to your
advantage,
like warmth upon frost it will melt away
your sins.
Those who neglect their father are like
blasphemers;
those who provoke their mother are
accursed by their Creator.

Paul the Apostle proposes similar advice to Timothy, writing as an older and experienced missionary to his younger associate: “Do not rebuke an older man, but appeal to him as a father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters with complete purity.” (1 Timothy 5:1-2)

It is interesting that the Bible refers to “retirement” only once, recommending the

Father Blaise Czaja, C.P., preaches parish missions across the United States. *(All photos are used with permission of The Passionists of Holy Cross Province.)*



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Father Christopher Gibson, C.P., *above, left*, blesses a woman with a relic of St. Paul of the Cross during the Passionist Congregation's 300th Jubilee Celebration at Sacred Heart Monastery, Louisville, KY. The monastery serves as a residence for senior members in Holy Cross Province.

retirement of the priests from their temple service at age 50 so that younger priests may have an opportunity to exercise their roles (see Numbers 8:25). Otherwise, the Bible assumes that the elderly remain an integral part of society, not withdrawing from a productive life within the extended family (where most industry took place) but adapting their evolving role to the requirements of their age and strength. In fact, most ancient societies - not just in the biblical world - revered what was "old:" ancient traditions, ancient religious practices, and ancient people, an attitude difficult to retain in the more production and consumer-oriented society that characterizes modern western civilization. "Retirement" as a widespread social practice seems to have developed in the industrial age when younger (and less paid) workers replaced older ones. Coupled with the focus on the nuclear family and less involvement with the extended family, many "retired" workers found

themselves "warehoused," without any meaningful role in society and personally unprepared for a life of inactivity.

Pope Francis remarks that the destruction wreaked on the elderly by the pandemic should be a prophetic sign of the times for us, leading us to "find out who are the lonely elderly nearby, and how with others I could offer them friendship. Or I might want to ensure that care homes are as much like families as possible, well-funded and embedded in community. At a deeper level, we may wonder how we ended up in this situation, under pressure from jobs and families who convince people they cannot have the elderly living with them." (p. 59) Seeing reality in a new way, the Pope asserts, can be a "sign from God," prompting us to respond with the depth that only the Holy Spirit can give us.

Passionist Spirituality and the Aging

The Pope's challenge coincides with the ministry of the National Religious Retirement Office's mission to draw attention to the innate dignity and human needs of the elderly among us. As a Passionist Priest, it is an honor for me to reflect on what our congregation's spirituality can bring to this issue. As someone myself entering into the realm of the "elderly," I am also personally interested in this question!

Our Passionist Constitutions make a relatively brief but significant reference to care for the "aging"—a paragraph inserted into the chapter on "community life," and in a section dealing with care for the "sick brethren," on the one hand, and, on the other, remembering our "deceased brethren with love and thankfulness." The paragraph on the elderly brethren reads as follows:

The community must show the same care for the aging [as the for the sick mentioned in the previous paragraph],

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whose religious lives at this time must be made rewarding and fruitful. Their special needs should be remembered that the experience and wisdom they have gained from years of community living offer encouragement to their brethren, especially the young.

(Rule and Constitutions par. 30).

There are some key points tucked into this passage. The community should show care and respect for the elderly but also assist them in making their lives “rewarding and fruitful.” At the same time, the elderly religious are not simply objects of care—as important as that is—but they also have a role in the community. Their “experience and wisdom” should offer encouragement to the rest of the community, especially the young.

We are all aware that advances in medical science have translated into longer lives for most of us. At the same time, the health conditions of many older religious require skilled nursing care and are subject to state regulations. The result is often that religious communities face the

same dilemma as that of many families. It becomes impossible for some elderly and fragile religious to remain within the community and, instead, must now live in a nursing home or an assisted living institution isolated at some distance from their home in the religious community, and dependent on the kindness of their religious brothers or sisters to visit them. Our Passionist province is fortunate in that our Passionist residence equipped with assisted living capacity and located in Louisville, Kentucky, is adjacent to an excellent nursing facility run by the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth. The men living in the nursing facility are virtually an extension of the Passionist community residence next store. Fortunately, this arrangement reflects Pope Francis’ suggestion that care homes be “embedded in communities” and be as “much like families as possible.”

It is our Passionist spirituality that offers our elderly religious the opportunity to contribute to the life of the community and to the wider church. Our founder, St. Paul of the Cross, felt called to focus in a particular way on the



Father Frank Keenan, C.P. (*seated*) celebrates his 60th Jubilee of Ordination. He is joined by family and members of his Passionist St. Vincent Strambi Community in Chicago, IL. *Pictured from left:* Father David Colhour, C.P., local superior; Father Pat Brennan, C.P.; Father Keenan’s niece, Joan Boudreau; Father Keenan (*seated*); Father Don Webber, C.P.; Father Keenan’s nephew, Jim Boudreau; and Father John Schork, C.P.. For over 40 years, Father Keenan served as hospital chaplain at Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge, IL.

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Sacred Heart Monastery, Louisville, KY, serves as the community residence of senior members in Holy Cross Province. The Passionists arrived in Louisville in 1879. Having outgrown their first residence by 1905, a new monastery was built on the site of the original house. Over the past 116 years, the monastery has served as a community residence, a house of theology, novitiate, college seminary and a spirituality center for priests, religious and laity.

Passion of Jesus. Of course, the death and resurrection of Christ is at the core of our Christian faith and is not a special preserve of the Passionists! But Paul Daneo, who lived in 18th century Italy, believed deeply that the cross of Christ was the most powerful sign of God's love for us. At a time of spiritual malaise (Paul's lifetime spanned the age of the French Revolution and a time of crisis in the Italian states), he turned at first to hospital ministry but ultimately found his calling in preaching missions and retreats in order to revitalize the Christian life of his contemporaries. At the heart of his message was the mystery of God's love revealed in the Passion of Jesus.

Focusing on the suffering of Jesus for our sake was both a source of comfort for those who suffered poverty and meaningless in their lives, as well as a source of hope that, ultimately suffering would issue in resurrection. The missionary congregation that Paul founded would take,

in addition to the classic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, a fourth vow to promote devotion to the Passion of Jesus.

Keeping Alive the "Memory of the Passion"

Over time the Passionist spirituality and the mission of our congregation were expressed in a phrase that our Founder also favored, namely "to keep alive the memory of the Passion."

This was to be done both by our ministry of proclaiming the Gospel in various contexts but also by the manner of our lives as religious. Both our lives and our ministry were to be rooted in contemplation of the Passion of Jesus. As noted in a declaration of a recent General Chapter, "Our Contemplation of the Crucified One draws us more deeply into the Mystery of God who is love, compassion, life and justice, and who continues to be present and active in the lives and history of men and women."

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Father Eric Meyer, C.P., prays quietly in the Community Chapel of Sacred Heart Monastery, Louisville, KY.

Our Constitutions speak of two fundamental dimensions of the Passion of Jesus. One is the “historical” reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus. With the eyes of faith, Christians see the crucifixion of Jesus as a supreme and paradoxical expression of God’s love for us. John’s Gospel expresses it most vividly: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13) John’s Gospel views the entire mission of Jesus from his Father as a revelation of redemptive love, a love finding its fullest expression in the complete giving of life revealed in the cross: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:16-17)

The first obligation of our Passionist mission is to proclaim that message of love whenever and wherever we can. This also includes the manner of our life and our relationships within community. Here is one important opening for the

contribution of our elderly members. To persevere through life with a spirit of love and compassion, without bitterness or regret, is an authentic witness that the older members of our community can give in a unique way. They can show that living one’s life contemplating the memory of God’s enduring love revealed in the Passion of Jesus can lead to a sense of enduring serenity even in the face of death.

The Contemporary Passion

The second dimension of the Passion of Jesus emphasized in our constitutions and various chapter decrees points to the contemporary expression of the Passion of Jesus in our world today. Paul the Apostle may be speaking in a similar way in a challenging passage from Colossians: “... in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.” (Colossians 1:24)

Our Passionist Constitutions express it this way:

We are aware that the Passion of Christ continues in this world until He comes in glory; therefore, we share in the joys and sorrows of our contemporaries as we journey through life toward our Father. We wish to share in the distress of all, especially those who are poor and neglected; we seek to offer them comfort and to relieve the burden of their sorrow. The power of the Cross, which is the wisdom of God, gives us strength to discern and remove the causes of human suffering. (Rule and Constitutions # 3)

This dimension of our Passionist spirituality challenges us to be attentive to the injustices of our present society and to respond with prophetic action. As Pope Francis has noted, neglect and even abuse of the elderly cries out for justice. One of the signs of the times is for religious communities such as our own to both care

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for our elderly brethren and to respect the witness of their life and perseverance. At the same time, contemplating the world through eyes of faith—eyes that contemplate the sufferings of Christ alive in the world today—prompts us to challenge our contemporaries never to neglect or isolate the elderly but to find ways of incorporating them more deeply into the heart of our modern society.

I will let our Passionist General Chapter have the last word: “Passionists, in solidarity with today’s crucified, look to the power of the cross in order to take a prophetic stance against injustice and credibly proclaim the God of life...The suffering of our world is one place where our life of faith is especially called to be present and active; through contemplation of Jesus, listening to his voice, receiving with gratitude the strength of his power, we renew our commitment and discover anew the message of salvation within the culture in which we live.”

From left: Father Eric Meyer, C.P., and Father Bob Weiss, C.P., at the entrance to Sacred Heart Monastery, Louisville, KY.



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National Religious Retirement
Office as we continue to give thanks
this Christmas for the
generosity of our many
friends and benefactors.
We pray that the birth of the
Christ Child will bring peace and joy
to your life and to our world
throughout the coming year.*

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