

“What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?” (Mt 16:26) Paul Francis Daneii was offered a rich inheritance upon the death of his uncle on the condition that he married and become a family man. Paul consciously chose poverty and virginity instead. He passed the inheritance onto his brothers and sisters and only asked for his uncle’s breviary so that he could pray the Liturgy of the Hours.

Inspired by a vision from God, Paul of the Cross founded the Passionist Order. He felt called to live a life of austere poverty wholly dependent on God:

God gave these inspirations together with great interior consolations... The idea came to me of wearing a tunic of coarse black cloth, made of the most ordinary wool of the region, to go barefoot, to live in the greatest poverty – in a word to live, with the grace of God, a life of penance. Thereafter this thought never left me.ⁱ

At the time, he was a layman, but there was no doubt in his mind God was calling him to leave the world behind and to inspire others to love and follow God the same way. God also gave him the idea of a distinctive habit to wear:

At that moment I saw myself clothed in spirit in a black garment that touched the ground, with a white cross on my breast. Under the cross the name of Jesus was written in white letters: “This is a sign to show how pure and spotless must be the heart that is to bear written upon it the most holy name of Jesus.” The vision and the words made me weep.ⁱⁱ

In time, he was able to bring the vision into being and the Passionists were born with a special charism to preach about Jesus crucified.

But at its founding, the local bishop was not convinced his diocese needed another religious order. Paul was allowed to live a life of penance, but others would not be able to join him. Paul began his new life with a 40-day retreat and the Lord continued to inspire him with the insights necessary for a rule of life. For 6 years, he lived the life of a hermit in silence and solitude but never settling in one place. In 1725, Pope Benedict XIII approved the gathering of companions and the formation of a new congregation.

The original Passionists grew from a lay to a clerical congregation which went far beyond its original diocesan roots. With the approval of Benedict XIV in 1741, “Father Paul and his companions made their religious profession and assumed the Passionist badge publicly.” In 1747, Paul of the Cross was elected the Superior General of the Order and over time the order grew and literally formed a wreath around Rome. “By the time of his death in 1775 the status of the Congregation were 176 religious, two provinces and twelve communities.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Paul’s prayer and ministry were fueled by his “constant personal union with the Passion and Cross of our Lord.”^{iv} He was a powerful preacher able to bring hardened soldiers and thieves to tears by sharing his own passion for our loving God. There was no sinner so hardened and hopeless that did not respond to the grace and freedom offered in Christ Jesus.

Near death in August of 1775, Paul of the Cross spoke to his brother Passionists on the central focus of the religious order:

Foster in the Congregation, the spirit of prayer, the spirit of solitude, and the spirit of poverty. Be certain that if these three things are maintained, the Congregation shall shine as the sun in the sight of God and men... Try to labor as much as possible for the good of Holy Church, for the salvation of poor souls by missions, spiritual exercises and other works according to our Institute promoting in all hearts devotion to the Passion of Jesus Christ and the Sorrows of Mary.^v

Paul of the Cross died October 18, 1775. To the very end, he lived a very simple and austere lifestyle. This charism enabled him to be single minded in his focus on sharing his love of God with everyone he encountered.

We live in a very different era, one of material abundance in comparison to prior generations. Sometimes, the conveniences of modern life can distract us from what is most important. Like Paul of the Cross, we need to spend silent time in prayer reflecting on the love of God and his call to us. “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt 16:24-25).

ⁱ passionistcharism.wordpress.com/biography-of-st-paul-of-the-cross/

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-paul-of-the-cross-24

^v passionistcharism.wordpress.com/biography-of-st-paul-of-the-cross/