“I have been crucified with Christ.” (Gal 2:19)

Suffering, whether it is physical, mental, emotional or spiritual, seems to be an inevitable part of life. Some flee from suffering seeking relief and escape. Others, disillusioned by pain, become confused about the meaning of life and some, troubled by evil in the world, question the existence of God. Whether someone is fighting against injustice, enduring the consequences of one’s own regretful decisions or the poor choices of another, weighed down by sin or burdened by illness, Jesus Christ shows us that suffering does not have to be pointless. The gift of self in love includes a generous acceptance of suffering as Saint John Paul II expresses in the Theology of The Body:

“It is a characteristic feature of the human heart to accept even difficult demands in the name of love, for an ideal, and above all in the name of love for a person (love is, in fact, oriented by its very nature toward the person). And so, in this call to continence ‘for the kingdom of heaven,’ first the disciples and then the whole living Tradition of the Church quickly discovered the love for Christ himself as the Bridegroom of the Church, Bridegroom of souls, to whom he has given himself to the end in the mystery of his Passover and the Eucharist.”

As a member of the “living Tradition of the Church”, St. Paul of the Cross chose a celibate life for the kingdom of heaven and joined himself in the spousal love of Christ and the Church. He willingly accepted the demands of love and entered into “the mystery of [Christ’s] Passover and the Eucharist.” For this reason, “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2) became St. Paul of the Cross’ motto, his mission and the nature of the religious community he founded known as the Passionists.

Born January 3, 1694 to a family of noble heritage, Paul Francesco Danei and his family were no strangers to suffering. They lived in poverty and were forced to move to Ovada, Italy after the city of Piedmont was devastated by the Franco-Spanish War of Succession. Home life was just as unstable since eleven of the sixteen children of Luke and Anne Marie Danei had died in childhood.

Amidst the challenges and uncertainties of family life, Paul’s parents established a firm foundation in the Catholic faith. Anne Marie made sure her children were baptized soon after birth to assure that they would receive the salvific grace of the sacrament. They were instructed in living a holy life and keeping a devotion to the Passion of Christ and the Desert Fathers. She would show the children the crucifix and say: “See how much Jesus suffered. See the crown of thorns on his head.”

This left a lasting impression on Paul.

One day at church in the year 1713 Paul experienced a profound conversion while listening to a priest. He was so moved by the experience that he made a general confession and recommitted himself to Jesus Christ. In his zeal Paul heeded Pope Clement XI’s call and enlisted in a crusade against the Turks in the Republic of Venice. He would soon leave the campaign after attending 40 hours devotion. Over the next several years while he awaited God’s call, Paul remained at home to support his family and his father’s tobacco business.

His discovery of his vocation seemed to follow the pattern of Saint John Paul II’s concept of original solitude. In solitude Paul prayed “before God in search of his own being…in search of his own definition.” Vocational clarity did not come swiftly for Saint Paul of the Cross, but in the “Preface to the Rule of the Poor of Jesus” he describes God’s inspiration coming to him in four stages. The first inspiration came at twenty-four while on a 40-day retreat. He wrote in his spiritual diary the new meaning he had discovered: “I do not desire to know anything else, or to taste any consolation. I desire only to be crucified with Jesus.” Clearly, in solitude, Paul came to understand his identity before God. Saint John Paul II explains this experience: “Man is ‘alone’: this is to say that through his own humanity, through what he is, he is at the same time set into a unique, exclusive, and unrepeatable relationship with God himself.”

---

1 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, a3, obj1
3 Gabriele Cingolani, *St. Paul of the Cross*, 7
4 Ibid, 8.
7 Martin Bialas, 30; Gal 2:19

THEOLOGY OF THE BODY INSTITUTE: CLERGY ENRICHMENT PROGRAM – IN THE PERSON OF CHRIST www.TOBINSTITUTE.ORG
with God he realized his capacity to be a “partner of the Absolute.” In other words, the identity as a disciple of Christ that he received in Baptism was marked by the Passion of Christ, and in prayer he realized he was to live this out in imitation of Christ. Consequently, he abandoned the things of this world that left him wanting in exchange for solitude before God that gave him purpose. He discarded laymen’s clothes and put on a black tunic. He left behind his father’s business for a life of solitude, extreme poverty and penance. Over a five-day period he penned a rule of life that would afford him a life of prayer that allowed for regular return to this solitude and further inspiration from God. This way would eventually be adopted as the rule for his religious community.

Called to be a celibate for the kingdom of God, Saint Paul of the Cross would offer himself in a sacrificial way as “a gift of self understood as a renunciation, but realized above all out of love.” So, though he longed for solitude in a hermitage, Saint Paul of the Cross was further inspired in prayer to live his new way of life with companions. His first recruit was his own brother, John Baptist, who remained his faithful companion as well as his spiritual director and confessor until he died in 1765. He named the community “The Poor of Jesus” and instructed them in personal sanctification and charity towards their neighbor by catechizing the local parishes. And so, we see in Saint Paul and his companions, this sacrificial taking up of celibate life for the kingdom of God lived in community “is at the same time an affirmation that flows from the discovery of the ‘gift’…a new perspective of personally realizing oneself ‘through a sincere gift of self’.” So, all the members of the community came to experience a deeper meaning in his celibate life united in charity with brothers and together in service to their neighbors.

St. Paul of the Cross’s final inspiration was to formalize this group of companions into a religious community that was recognized with papal approval of the rule and solemn vows. This final effort would require many years to accomplish with exterior obstacles and interior darkness, confusion and doubt. Nevertheless, St. Paul of the Cross accepted these exterior and interior challenges which only helped to confirm the inner certainty formed in his prayer life as he stood before the Lord at the foot of the cross.

To begin to achieve this final inspiration and secure papal approval of the rule and solemn vows, the religious community moved to Rome. There they humbly accepted the apostolate to the sick at St. Gallicano Hospital where they were united to their fellow men in suffering. They catechized patients and staff and encouraged them to receive the sacraments often. Their zeal for the faith and grasp of theology were soon noticed by a local cardinal and to their surprise he called them to the priesthood. Reluctant at first having never felt a call to the priesthood, the entire religious community accepted the call, and after only three months of formation, they were all ordained by Pope Benedict XIII at the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome on June 7, 1727. After their ordination they returned to the pastoral care of the sick endowed with a deeper commitment and a greater fecundity as they celebrated the sacraments for and with the sick, the suffering and the dying.

With growing difficulties at the hospital a dispensation was granted to them to leave the apostolate in Rome and then to move to Mount Argentario in Tuscany to secure this new community in a life of prayer, solitude and preaching. The brothers were overjoyed by the potential of this secluded and scenic location whose very establishment would be a way of the cross for them. In a letter St. Paul of the Cross wrote: “I see nothing but crosses, storms, strife, confusion…I often see the whole thing leveled to the ground—I’m not speaking of the walls. God knows all about it. I need much help and many prayers.”

As the companions made efforts to shape the buildings they would live in, God would allow suffering to shape them as a community. For one, the whole community fell ill with fever. Yet, this was not their biggest hardship since request for alms was met with ridicule and skepticism. Saint Paul of the Cross wrote: “I have more need of prayers than of good health…Storms are brewing, the darkness is deepening, fears won’t go away, men scourge with the tongue. Battles from within and from without, fears and darkness, stupidity, weariness, and desolation. How much more desirable death would be to life…” Not to be deterred, he expressed hope in God saying: “But so be it. May it be pleasing to God, who is opening to me the way to a blessed eternity.” They finished construction of their new home several years later in 1737.

9 Ibid.
10 Martin Bialas, 30, 32.
12 Martin Bialas, 32.
13 Saint John Paul II, Theology of the Body, Audience 81:6
16 Ibid, 111.
These trying times would shape them as a community, but St. Paul of the Cross knew this was not sufficient without a total self-gift freely given and freely expressed before God and the Church. To this end he made every effort to receive papal recognition of the rule and solemn vows.\textsuperscript{17} Requiring solemn vows from each man in the community was very important for Saint Paul of the Cross, because it would require each celibate man a moment in their life before God and the Church where they act from the “interior freedom of the gift—the disinterested gift of self”\textsuperscript{18} in which they freely choose to participate in the sacrificial love of “Christ himself as the Bridegroom of the Church…to whom he has given himself to the end in the mystery of his Passover and the Eucharist.”\textsuperscript{19}

Surprisingly, papal approval was slowed by the uncommon use of a patch on their habit, that of the Sacred Heart with the inscription “\textit{Jesu Xpi Passio}”.\textsuperscript{20} To St. Paul’s delight, the inspiration he received in the quiet solitude of prayer at the age of twenty-four was instrumental in achieving papal approval for his religious community on May 15, 1741. The community that had been known as the “The Poor of Jesus” took the new title: “Congregation of the Least Clerics Regular, Discalced, of the Most Holy Cross and Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ.” Five years later, the community of priests received permission to make solemn vows professing the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience, with a fourth vow to preach Christ and him crucified. He and his brother priests were not alone in their desire to embrace the cross and unite themselves to Christ’s passion for by 1760 St. Paul of the Cross had established five new monasteries.

St. Paul of the Cross is a true witness that suffering is not devoid of meaning and enduring suffering by generosity of one’s life is an act of love. Suffering can tempt us to hold onto regret, foster bitterness and resentment in our hearts, and express our troubled spirits with anger and hatred for others. These evil responses do not eliminate suffering, but only further poison one’s heart. St. Paul of the Cross shows us that embracing our suffering and uniting it to Jesus’ suffering on the cross makes it a way of love that opens us up to enjoying God’s work in this life and anticipating the joys of heaven in the next.

\textbf{Rev. Bernard J. Taglianetti} was ordained for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia in 2005. He was assigned as parochial vicar to Saint Anastasia Parish in Newtown Square from 2005-2009 and Saint Ignatius of Antioch in Yardley from 2009-2012. He resided at Saints Cosmas and Damian Parish in Conshohocken from 2012-2014 while he attended the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family at Catholic University in Washington DC where he achieved an STL degree. He is currently on the St. Charles Borromeo Seminary faculty in the moral theology department.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{17} Martin Bialas, 31.
\textsuperscript{18} Saint John Paul II, \textit{Theology of the Body}, Audience 15:3
\textsuperscript{19} Saint John Paul II, \textit{Theology of the Body}, Audience 79:9
\textsuperscript{20} Bennet Kelley, C.P., 140.
\end{flushright}