

**PAUL, OUR BROTHER:
BIBLICAL WISDOM FOR PASSIONIST APOSTLES
Passionist General Synod
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This year, as you know, has been declared the 2000th anniversary of Paul the Apostle's birth. We, as Passionists, revere another Paul—Paul Daneo, our founder. I think there is a lot of kinship between these two great saints, both of whom were so devoted to the memory of the passion of Jesus.

In this final segment of our reflections today I thought it might be salutary to reflect as Passionists on Paul the Apostle, and to see the challenge of restructuring in the light of Paul's life and theology.

In June of this year Pope Benedict officially declared the anniversary year in the Basilica of Saint Paul's Outside the walls in Rome. No doubt many of you have visited that great church. This coming January marks the 50th anniversary of another famous declaration in that basilica—when Pope John XXIII announced his intention to convene the Second Vatican council!

If you have visited this great church then you may remember the striking statue of Paul that stands in the courtyard in front of that great church. It is a dramatic and unusual portrayal, I think. Paul stands in a reflective mood, with what seems to be a prayer shawl hooding his brow, the sword of God's Word grasped firmly in his hand. I had the sense of a Paul somewhat fatigued, his fierce zeal still strong but tempered, a man taking stock at the end of passionately committed and wonderfully turbulent life.

Both personally and in the wider social and religious world of his day, Paul witnessed an old world die and a new one born. I find extraordinary comfort in Paul these days--not just in the depth and power of his theology but, as the later New Testament writings did, in the example of his apostolic life.

I think we Passionists who are also struggling with profound change and, for you as leaders of the Congregation with the challenging of bringing the Passionist communities around the world to consider change, can well turn to the example of Paul as an example and inspiration for the work ahead. Perhaps more than any other figure in the early Church Paul embodied profound conversion and transformation for the sake of the gospel—both on a personal level and within the religious tradition to which he was passionately committed.

Think for a moment of the changes Paul experienced in his own lifetime. Sometime around 8 A.D., Paul was born in Tarsus, a provincial capital in south central Asia Minor, present day Turkey. Tarsus was a city noted for its culture and learning, a thoroughly Greco-Roman city, yet one with a significant Jewish minority population. We know that Paul was born into a devout Jewish family—a heritage he would always cherish and respect. Yet he was also born of a father who was a citizen of Rome—we don't know, perhaps because his father had been part of the military or was a freed slave. From this dual heritage—devotedly Jewish and proudly Roman--Paul would embody within himself the cultural and religious mix that would be key for his future mission. From his Jewish heritage came a tenacious and unyielding faith in the God of Israel, the compassionate, liberating God who had created the world and held it in his loving providence. And from Judaism, as well, a strong moral sense of translating one's belief in God into a life

obedient to God's will. From his Roman heritage and his classical education in Tarsus, Paul would draw on a broad vision of the Mediterranean world in all its diversity and dynamism and be schooled in the art of rhetoric and persuasion that Rome had inherited from its Greek predecessors.

Did the young Paul, immersed in love of his Jewish piety or being schooled in the classic literature of Greece, ever imagine some dreamy afternoon in Tarsus that he would travel nearly 10,000 miles—most of it on foot and a lot of it on the sea that he feared, by the way,—for the sake of a Crucified Galilean whom Paul would come to believe was the embodiment of the divine presence on earth and the revelation of God's love for the world including the Gentile world? Did Paul, who described himself as a “Hebrew of the Hebrews” and “zealous for the tradition of his ancestors,” ever think he would be known for 2000 years of history as the “apostle to the Gentiles”?

Paul and Conversion:

The facts of the matter is that Paul of Tarsus, a devout and passionate Jew, would be remembered as one whose life experienced a profound transformation, one who would become an extraordinary follower of Jesus and recognized as a key promoter of the Gentile mission of the Early Church.

The New Testament gives us two pictures of a crucial turning point in Paul's life. One is found in the dramatic conversion stories of the Acts of the Apostles. Paul whose cocksure zeal drove him to persecute the followers of Jesus, who had watched with approval the stoning of Steven, who had kept guard over the cloaks of the very men who threw the deadly stones, Paul who had going into homes and dragged women and children to punish them for their heresy (Acts 7:58—8:3; 1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:23)—that zealous Paul would be knocked to the ground by the power of Christ's redeeming presence. Blinded by the light of God's forgiving love, Paul, paradoxically, would begin to see the truth for the first time (Acts 9:3-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18). In Luke's account of the unfolding history of the early community, Paul the tormentor and persecutor of the Christians would now become the “chosen vessel” – the one who would bring the gospel of Jesus from Judea to Antioch and westward to Greece and ultimately to Rome.

Even in the fulfillment of that destiny irony would rule. Paul would get to Rome and to the fulfillment of his mission not by a seamless journey but as a prisoner brought by a prison ship and confined to house arrest in the Imperial city. Yet Luke closes this great story of the triumph of the early church's mission by noting that Paul, although imprisoned, proclaimed the gospel “with assurance and unhindered” (Acts 28:31).

Thus in the portrayal of the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's conversion is, in a certain sense, forced from the outside—incredible experiences beyond his control turn his religious world upside down and transform his life forever.

But reflecting many years later on this life-changing conversion, Paul in his own words presents a different, if complementary portrayal. There is little mention of dramatic events on the road to Damascus (although see 2 Cor 11:32; Gal 1:17). Looking back Paul now sees that God had been calling him to this extraordinary transformation from all time—even before he was knit together in his mother's womb. In his letter to the Galatians where he reflects on his apostolic vocation Paul cites the great prophetic words of Isaiah 49 and Jeremiah chapter 1 – “Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘Before I formed in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’” (Jer 1:4-5). The catalyst for radical change was

not simply the turbulence of outside events but the fulfillment of a God-given destiny, an act of providence to which God had called him from all time.

All of us, I think, can reflect on these different but authentic modalities of our life. On one level, we are driven by factors outside of us: world events, the economy, the changing face of the church, the movements of culture and history. But on another, equally important, level we believe that we are held in God's hands, our lives both individually and collectively a response to God's profound call to us, a call imbedded in God's loving providence for all time; God leading us home despite our very selves and beyond our imagination.

Paul's Life and Theology Driven by His God-given mission to proclaim the Gospel to the World:

There is something else we can learn from our brother Paul as we reflect on our own lives and the life of our community as whole. Paul channeled all of his life force into the fulfillment of his God given mission.

This is one of the intriguing mysteries of Paul's life. From the very first moment of his encounter with the Risen Christ and the beauty of the gospel message, Paul felt called by God to proclaim this good news not just to his fellow Jews but to the Gentile world. There was no gap; no long pondering that led after time to this decision. Paul was convinced of the gospel's life-giving force for all of humanity from the very first instant of his encounter with Christ.

Paul's urgent missionary logic is clear in this famous passage from his letter to the Romans: "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach? And how can people preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news!'" (Rom 10:13-15).

Even though Paul testifies that he was called to be a missionary to the Gentiles from the first moment he encountered the Risen Christ (see Gal 1:15-16), still no doubt it took time for Paul to develop his vocation. He spent considerable time in prayer and solitude in Syria, near Damascus and went for a brief time to Jerusalem to confer with Peter and James (Gal 1:17-20). Afterwards he went to Cilicia (his home region in southern Asia Minor) and eventually to Antioch, which would be his first true missionary base. In Paul's day Antioch (located in present day Turkey near the Lebanon and Syrian borders) was the third largest city in the Roman Empire and in this thriving commercial and cultural center, was a significant Jewish community as well as a dominant Gentile population. Here, Acts tells us, the followers of Jesus were first called "Christians" and here Paul, under the guidance of Barnabas and others, would hone his message for Gentile Christians and from here he would launch his missionary journeys west through Asia Minor and eventually to Greece when he first set foot on what would be European soil and where he would establish a Christian community at Philippi (Acts 16:11-12).

We might also recall that Paul was someone who made no small plans, even though we might say vocations were sparse and finances precarious. As he indicates in Romans 15, Paul's intention was to plant churches all around the northern rim of the Mediterranean world, eventually going even to Spain, thus winning over the Gentiles for Christ, a glorious accomplishment of God's grace that he hoped would in turn convince all of Israel itself to accept Christ. Then Paul's mission would be accomplished! Paul, of course, never

saw this dream realized, but his ardent love of Christ and his consuming concern for the Gentiles and his own beloved Jewish people kept the driving passion of his life fully alive.

Paul The “Passionist”

Paul, as you know, was not an original or charter member of Jesus' disciples; he was not even a Matthias, chosen late but still one of those who had walked with Jesus from the beginning, as Luke puts it. Paul never forgot his second generation status--even worse his wrong headed persecution of the Christian movement. He would forever remain in his own estimation as one “born out of due time.” But that did not take away from Paul's passionate commitment to Christ or the Gospel.

Paul's passion was undoubtedly a product in part of a naturally fiery temperament. No even-tempered phlegmatic would express in a public letter like Galatians the hope that those Christians who proposed circumcision for his Gentile converts would have the knife slip in their own case--or begin a letter to a prominent church with the address: “O Stupid Galatians!” Paul, I fear, may not have been easy to live with--perhaps it is no accident that his ministry was primarily an itinerant one. The community that he knew the best and where he lived for some time was Corinth--and we all know that Paul had his troubles with the Corinthians and they with him!

But it is equally clear that the sustaining fire of Paul's passion came from the intensity of his commitment to Christ and the good news of God. At one point in his life Paul affirm to his community the startling confession: “Christ lives in me.” It was this that drove him in his ministry and from this came his preaching and his theology. It was the passion of Paul that led him to write letters whose imagery and force changed Christian consciousness forever. Letters written in rapid, often tortured prose; letters so bursting with ideas that more than one scribe at a time had to take Paul's dictation and even another inspired biblical author had to say, with some understatement, there are things in the writings of our Brother Paul that are hard to understand (see 2 Peter 3:16).

My point is that Paul's ideas, his preaching, his writing, his theology, his teaching were welded to his own passionate discipleship. Paul's theology was not borrowed or trendy or merely speculative. Paul of Tarsus, pastoral theologian, derived his vision from the living soul of the church and his own passionate commitment to it. He was the recipient and responsible guardian of tradition: "I hand on to you what I first received." But he also was able, in dialogue with his churches, to draw out a theological vision from the genuine Christian experience of his people: the church as the body of Christ in response to the factionalism of Corinth; a theology of weakness in the face of his, and his Christians' own experience of limitation--physical and spiritual; a theology of a law free gospel because of his confidence in the religious experience of Gentiles; a theology of a cosmic Christ triumphant over the cosmos because of the paralyzing fear of fates so prevalent in the Greco-Roman world.

The model is clear. Those of us who have--much more than most Christians do--the privilege and opportunity to study the Scriptures, to study the church's teaching in a more intense way, and to reflect on pastoral experience and to preach the gospel to people throughout the world, we would do well to pray for a small measure of the passion of Paul and to make sure that what we proclaim is linked to a burning commitment of discipleship and rooted in the experience of real people and a believing community.

But as Passionists we need to note in particular that the very heart of Paul's theology and his spirituality was his contemplation of the passion of Jesus. For Paul the

dying and rising of Jesus Christ was the reality that explained all reality, that revealed the true face of God. In the light of the Passion, of the Paschal mystery, Paul rethought and rediscovered the heart of his Jewish tradition. The God of Abraham was also the God of the Nations. The God of Jesus Crucified was revealed not in the trappings of power and splendor but in the marvel of what humans counted as weakness: a life poured out for others.

“For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ Crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” (1 Cor 1:22-25).

From this center Paul would contemplate everything: the heart of Christian life was love, as it was the unconditional love that animated the Crucified Christ; the experience of limitation and weakness, as Paul himself experienced in his own mortal body, would find meaning in the crucified body of Jesus who gave himself for us; the body of Christ that was the church would give greatest honor to its most weak and least honorable member because God had revealed himself to the world through a Crucified Messiah and thus the Body of Christ was a crucified body in which the wounds were still visible; and the apostolic sufferings and wrenching heartache Paul experienced in the course of his ministry or his communities experienced in their struggles and suffering were not in vain because the cross of Jesus had forever affirmed that through God’s grace from death comes abundant life. And on we could go... Paul of Tarsus whose life was seized by the memory of the passion is truly our brother as Passionists...

Paul as Confident Leader and non-possessive Collaborator.

I am very aware that in talking to you I have the privilege of talking to men who have been called to leadership in a very challenging time—no matter where you find yourself in our worldwide Passionist Congregation. I think we can learn something about apostolic leadership from Paul, too.

It does not take a reader of Paul's letters very long to see that this was a man with a fairly robust ego. Paul was very conscious of his role as an "apostle of Jesus Christ" and cites it frequently. It marks the beginning and the conclusion of virtually every letter he wrote. When his apostolic authority was under attack--as it was in Galatians and 2 Corinthians--his response is vigorous and uncompromising.

But it would be a dreadful misunderstanding of Paul and his ministry to think of him (as has sometimes been the case) as some solitary colossus standing astride the early church or as a "lone ranger," moving fearlessly and alone across the map of the Mediterranean world, planting the seed of the Gospel without dependence on or connection with others.

This image is false and our evidence is Paul's own testimony. One of the most remarkable and important insights we have gained into Paul in recent times is that he operated within an extraordinary network of co-workers. Paul did not shrink from the demands of leadership or the responsibility of authority but he exercised that calling in a manner compatible with his own theology of the passion and of the community that belonged to Christ.

The famous concluding passage in Romans 16 is one of the best sources of evidence for this and has become one of my favorite New Testament texts. As Paul

concludes this letter to a church he has never visited, but one that obviously had great importance to him, he adds a series of greetings to Christians at Rome that gives a breathtaking insight into the range of his contacts and his non-possessive spirit, as well as testimony to the mobility and networking of the early Christians themselves:

He begins with "Phoebe, the Deacon" (as Paul calls her, not "deaconess"), at Cenchreae, the port of Corinth, who must have been visiting Rome, a woman the Romans are urged to receive as a saint because she has been a helper and good friend to Paul.

Then Prisca and Aquila, whom Paul calls my "co-workers in Christ Jesus who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but also all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks"--the Jewish Christian couple from Rome who had already moved to Corinth and formed a house church before Paul arrived and who made it possible for him to have any success in that major city of the Empire.

The list goes on: Junia and Andronicus; another couple whom Paul calls "apostles"--throwing translators into a dither for centuries, leading them to call Junia "Junias," even though this masculine form doesn't exist in Greek.--apostles whom Paul says were "in Christ" before him.

He greets Epaphroditus, the first convert to Christ in Asia. And then Paul warms to his topic: "Greet Mary who has worked very hard among you. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, my co-worker. Greet the family of Aristobulus. Greet those wonderful workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother--who is also mother to me. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas. Philogous, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints. Yes and Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the Churches of Christ greet you."

Paul runs out of breath and out of room as this incredible list of earnest and personal greetings to friends and fellow workers pours out of him at the close of the letter. Twenty-nine Greek and Jewish names (10 of them women), drawn from nobility, freemen and slaves.

The facts about the abundance of Paul's apostolic contacts could go on and on: Paul apparently never traveled alone; he hands out the title "co-worker" liberally throughout his letters, and even his letters themselves are collaborative pieces, all but two of them are explicitly co-authored.

But more important still, Paul's sense of collaboration is not simply a personal style or imposed by necessity but flows as well from the deepest experience of his faith and his theological convictions, from his vision of the Gospel, rooted ultimately in his image of the God who gathered all people, who was the God of Jews and Gentiles. A conviction that spills over into Paul's consistently collaborative images of the church as a body of many members, as a profusion of gifts welded into one Spirit, as an array of many instruments and materials fashioned into one living temple of God. The building up of the community of the church was his restless apostolic goal and he knew that every gift, no matter how brilliant, was subordinate to the gift of charity and the bonding of the community.

Paul's own theology of weakness put the ultimate check on the temptation to possessiveness about one's status or authority. Paul's own evident physical disability, his wrong headed persecution of the church early in his life when he had been so sure of his convictions and his moral prowess--all of these experiences had taught Paul his own moral fragility and led him to find his strength, paradoxically, in his own weakness because where he was weak, God was strong. Above all, Paul's contemplation of the Passion

protected him from conceiving of himself or his authority in arrogant terms. Jesus, God's Suffering Servant who gave his life that others might live, was the ultimate sign of how authentic authority was exercised.

That memory of Paul is needed now. We need confidence in our apostolic vocations, but need to hold them in a non-possessive way. Collaboration with others which we have embraced as a congregation is not a passing fad nor can it be theological dressing for expediency. It is an expression of the Gospel. Paul knew that and lived it. I do not need to remind any of you, my brothers, that you, too, work in a church where more than ever before in our history we will need to work alongside others in deep mutual respect and with a common sense of purpose, if our community is to be renewed and our Passionist mission sustained.

Paul: Suffering Apostle and Boundless Man of Hope

Allow me to cite one final characteristic of Paul. I am convinced from reading Paul's letters that he was a man who suffered greatly from his ministry, at the same time it was the consuming passion of his life. Paul began his ministry with bold plans, some of them bordering on the audacious. As mentioned earlier Paul lets us know in Romans 15 and through hints in other parts of his correspondence that his intent was to move around the rim of the Mediterranean world, planting Christian churches and so igniting the Roman world that eventually all the Gentiles would turn to Christ, which in turn would stir the jealousy of the rest of Israel, with all of the Jews then turning to Christ and Christ, with Paul's assistance, finally handing the world triumphantly over to God.

Not bad! Paul's exuberance reminds me of the motto of a great city planner in Chicago: "make no small plans"! But those wild apostolic hopes ran headlong into unyielding reality. Paul, for example, never seems to have anticipated the continuing existence of a non-Christian Judaism and the fact that a majority of his fellows Jews did not have the kind of experience Paul had and come to accept Jesus as the Christ broke his heart. The passage at the beginning of chapter 9 of the epistle to the Romans is one of the most poignant and incredible autobiographical passages ever:

"I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bears witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguished in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kin by race. They are Israelites and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen."

Willing "to be cut off from Christ for the sake of his kinspeople" -- can we imagine Paul saying that? Can we imagine the anguish that wrung that offer from his heart?

Paul's heart was broken not just by the dreams that never took flesh but by the constant drumfire against the few things he had been able to build. I think that Paul never saw his vision of a law-free Gospel for the Gentiles fully accepted. Truth squads of other Christian leaders seemed to have stalked his steps, questioning his orthodoxy, turning the heads of his converts to a different understanding of the church, planting doubts about his apostolic authority.

Paul's anguish and frustration come to rolling boil in a famous passage from 2 Cor 11: As if on some blue Monday, Paul's patience breaks and out comes a torrent of frustration and pain--directed not at the leaders of the synagogue, or at the threats of Roman officials, but at his own fellow apostles and the leaders of his own communities:

"Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? all right, he says, I will talk like a madman--I am a better one, with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?"

Ever ask someone on the wrong day how they are feeling--and they actually tell you...?!

Paul was no plaster of Paris saint; no abstract role model. He lived at a time when his vision of the church was very much in doubt; I don't think he ever lived to see it secured. And there must have been nights in Corinth or Thessaloniki, or Ephesus--surely in Jerusalem or during house arrest in Caesarea and Rome--when he wondered if he was on the wrong track after all--maybe thoughts like these have passed through your minds and hearts as you exercise your leadership of your province—or as now—when you share in the leadership of the entire Passionist Congregation?

But, at the same time, Paul managed what every great pastoral leader has done. Paul held tightly to his hope. I love the passage in chapter eight of the Letter to the Romans. Paul the cosmic doctor seems to ease on to the examination table the body of humanity, this groaning mass of creation. As he reviews the drama of salvation, Paul puts his ear to the heaving chest of the world and decides that the moans and groans he hears coming from the children of God and even from creation itself, are not death pangs but birth pains--the moans and groans of the Spirit leading all of the created world to God.

Paul never let go of his foundational experience of faith: the love of the Crucified Christ for him was the pledge of God's unbreakable covenant, of God's unceasing redemptive love for the world: "Can anything separate us from the love of God?" Paul asks.

It is a question wrung from the heart of a minister of the Gospel, of one called to mission, of an adult who has lived in the church from the inside and who still refuses to be undone by its scandals and frustrations, one who had lofty ideals of community but also knew the sad realities of divisions and conflicts, one, in effect, who knew the reality of suffering and yet nourished great hopes.

"Nothing," he says in the most soaring passage of his letters, "nothing, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 9:38-39).

Conclusion:

In the Church of Rome (and therefore in the community of the Passionists), we know that two apostles are to be remembered. Both Paul and Peter ministered to that church; both died there in testimony to their faith; and the memories of both have formed

that Church's spirit. Peter's ministry was one of reconciliation and unity. Working from the vantage point of the Jewish Christian community of Jerusalem, Peter exercised his mission in keeping the pieces of the burgeoning community together. He was often dazed at the rapid movement of the Spirit as the Christian community pushed out in unanticipated ways beyond the boundaries of the Jerusalem church: Cornelius the Roman Centurion seeking baptism at Caesarea; the Ethiopian Eunuch searching the scriptures on the road to Gaza; Greeks seeking baptism in Antioch of Syria. His role was to make connections, to insure continuity and peace with the church of Christ.

Paul, on the other hand, injected into that church a restive spirit of mission and a passion for bold ideas, the apostle of dramatic change and God's new possibilities. He was a champion for the freedom of God's great, world-embracing Spirit. He had great, even cosmic hopes that all of the Gentile world would be ignited with faith and in the glow of that flame, God's beloved Israel would warm to faith in Jesus. It was a vision that drove Paul all his life from his first mysterious encounter with the Risen Christ in a moment of intense conversion through moments of joy and perplexity as he planted his Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean world and into the final terrible moments of imprisonment and martyrdom. It was a vision he would never live to see fulfilled but would never relinquish. Paul had the marks of greatness that would characterize generations of Christians who would follow in his footsteps: teachers, apostles, missionaries, pastors, yes, even provincials--he sustained his hope in the face of great suffering. At the end of his life Paul may have had to lean on his sword but he still held it firmly.

As we as a Passionist community contemplate great change, the restructuring of our vision and our way of life, as we strive to hand on to a new generation of Passionists the living heritage of our great and fragile religious community, in a time tinged with apocalyptic hues, we might do well to remember Paul: passionate disciple of the Crucified Jesus and theologian of experience; confident in his apostolic call and identity but non-possessive and holding that treasure with others; a man whose restless, bold dreams brought him suffering but whose hope, rooted in faith, never dimmed.

A short time ago I was in Minneapolis to give a lecture at an assembly for Catholic school teachers and the woman who led the prayer service at the close of the day reflected that in traditional societies women have often been assigned two very different tasks: midwifing and preparing bodies for burial. She said, without bitterness or rancor, that at times in relationship to the church she does not know whether she is preparing a body for burial or being a midwife: preparing the body of someone she loves and reverences but whose life has come to an end--or assisting at a birth of some wondrous child whom she does not yet know. I think all of us who live close to the church know what she means.

It is truly an incredible time, an auspicious time for anyone who seeks to live a profound Christian life in our times and culture but how much more for those who aspire to be ministers of the gospel in the pattern of the Crucified Christ from whose selfless death came abundant life for the world.

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