

## Passion for Life

By Fr. Sebastian MacDonald, CP

We are rightfully confident in the power and efficacy of the Passion charism. Thanks to Paul of the Cross, we have been moved to regard it as a prime mover in our lives, as something not only devotional to lift our hearts and minds to God in prayer and worship, but also as something efficacious and practical, to bring about new ways of leading our lives, of thinking differently, of trying new things. It is a counter-cultural force that can favorably compete with all the many contemporary efforts underway in society to improve and better things.

The Passion charism nestles in the larger idea of the Paschal Mystery. This term is of fairly recent origin in Catholic circles, but the idea within it is as ancient as the person of Jesus Christ. It focuses on the central feature(s) of Jesus' life and efforts: His death on the Cross, and His resurrection from the dead. Together, they constitute the Paschal Mystery. This is mainline Passion spirituality as lived and taught by St. Paul of the Cross.

The two go together: death and resurrection. It's not a matter of one or the other. Jesus' death on the cross, without that love for God and us within His heart which was already an effect of the resurrection, would have been sheer tragedy and pure loss. As an isolated event, it would have effectively spelled "finish" to the impact of Jesus on our lives, as He breathed His last on the sordid cross, between two thieves, amid the catcalls and insults of bystanders, on a hillock called "the skull". A faint residue of His short life, with its miracles, uplifting teaching, and exemplary life, might have been all that remained of His time on earth, gaining a brief entry in a history book of that era, had He not been raised from the dead by His heavenly Father.

But He did rise—so we believe—and that makes all the difference in the world. His new life saved and rehabilitated His former life, and made it worth saving and imitating. This is mainline Passion spirituality.

There was an integrity to His life (including Jesus' teaching, preaching and miracles) and death that suggests a similar integrity to us as we ponder issues of abortion and the death penalty.

Abortion is the termination of the life of a fetus in the womb of its mother, usually for one of several reasons: the health or convenience of the mother, or the defective condition of the child. An easy way out of either of these scenarios seems to be aborting the child: the mother's health improves, a defective newborn, with all the time, attention and money it requires, is avoided, and the inconvenience of a baby is set aside. Similar reasoning prevailed in the killing of Jesus: it saved the authorities a heap of trouble to rid themselves of an unpleasant situation.

But, as the Paschal Mystery suggests, the death of Jesus was undone and nullified, and new life emerged, unforeseen by any and all. Jesus underwent the fullness of the Paschal

Mystery, and came out a victor despite His death. He experienced a new life that prevented an otherwise ugly and unpleasant event from delineating Who He was and what He accomplished. It was not the death of Jesus that brought about this unforeseen situation, but the saving action of God Who raised Jesus from the dead. So with abortion: it's not the death of the child that will bring about a new and better life for those concerned. Rather, that will result from the expenditure of effort, time, medical expertise and attention that bring about a new life for mother and child. Just as the "easy" way out (for the authorities), in the case of Jesus' death on the cross, worked no good whatsoever, so the death of the fetus works no good, certainly not for the fetus, and likely not for the mother, often saddled with post-abortion syndrome (pas). So-called easy abortions divert the medical profession from energetically and creatively addressing obstetrical/gynecological conditions that clamor for attention in the current legal abortion culture. Just as a Paschal Mystery spirituality transforms the death process into a resurrection experience of new life, not because of the death, but because of the intervention of other saving features (the act of God the Father), so the stress of pregnancy can transform the abortion option into an experience of new life—no longer linked to a death process, but to life-saving interventions.

Similarly with the death penalty. Good reasons are cited for inflicting death on the convicted person, as they were in the case of Jesus' condemnation to death (subverting the people, sedition, etc.). The quickest and easiest way of disposing of this blemish on society is the death penalty (though, as a matter of fact, it is often a tediously slow and expensive process). It satisfies a debt to society and pays the penalty for the injury the criminal has inflicted on the victim and his/her family. But there is another way of addressing the problems associated with the criminal, comparable to the other way that the Paschal Mystery suggests regarding the outcome of the death of Jesus on the cross, which was a death penalty in its own right, an execution sanctioned by the authorities. This other way involves no linkage between death and betterment, no more than did the death of Jesus. As with abortion, it calls for an investment of time, effort and attention, by competent professionals (chaplains, social workers, teachers, trainers), to rehabilitate the criminal, giving him/her the opportunity to undergo a change of life and attitude—a conversion, to the improvement of self, society, the victim's family: a new life.

Just as it was the unexpected intervention of God the Father that brought life out of the cross, so it is the intervention of outside sources (medical expertise, rehabilitation methods) that can sidestep the death of the fetus or the criminal, to bring about life for them. The Paschal Mystery is more about life than it is about death. It is not death that affects the good the Paschal Mystery celebrates. So with abortion and the death penalty: it is not the death of the fetus that brings about new life (for the mother) nor the death of the criminal that effects new life (for society or affected families). Rather, it is the intervention of outside factors (the power of God, the medical profession, the pastoral care ministers) that account for the new life of Jesus, the infant and mother, the criminal (and society and affected families). The spirituality of the Paschal Mystery urges this conviction on us.

# On Abortion and the Death Penalty

By Fr. Fred Sucher, CP

## ABORTION

If the work of Redemption accomplished by the Lord Jesus Christ on Calvary touches the meaning of the human being, that work of God will be concerned with all the elements of human life including the coming into life and the leaving of life in death.

Terminating a human life demands deep understanding and is charged with serious moral implications. The leaders and teachers in the Catholic Church have been providing guidance in many areas of concern. As Passionists we loyally accept that guidance and absorb its vibrant correctness.

The highest teaching authority in the Church, a General Council, reaffirmed the sinfulness of abortion: "Life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception: abortion and infanticide are abominable crimes.." (*Gaudium et Spes*, # 51.)

This truth has been reaffirmed again and again by national hierarchies and. Competent theologians have offered much help. Against this background we Passionists can ask ourselves: "Does our commitment to Christ Crucified influence our attitudes toward abortion? Do we have any insights to share?"

We know that the Son of God came to us to share his life to the full. He gave us his life for that very reason. "I am the Good Shepherd, I lay down my life for my sheep."  
"Greater love no one has than to give his life."

While Jesus is concerned chiefly about sharing divine life, the life of grace, a first requirement is a living human being capable of receiving that grace. So our Lord and Savior is necessarily concerned about our very bodily existence and well-being.

So when abortions - the destruction of human life of the unborn is counted in the millions each year across the world and is all too prevalent in our own country, it makes itself present in Christ's becoming not only the Victim for sin - but as St. Paul writes "sin itself."

The Son of God, the Son of Mary, appreciates the disappointment of souls who would never know the light of day or breathe in the fragrance of a spring flower. He knew the cruelty and selfishness that prompts the slaughter of innocents. He was to die to seek pardon for all the destroyers of the unborn. St. Luke tells us he sweated blood as he agreed to see himself the victim of sin, including the sin of killing the unborn.

Passionists are called to enter into the mind and sufferings of Christ. The Divine Savior came to call sinners, but he came to call them away from sin and to find their way to God. If Passionists are to have the mind and heart of Christ when facing the tsunami of abortions, we need to share the love of Christ for human kind. The unborn are the most defenseless; civil society refuses to protect them. Agencies exist to promote their killing.

The Heart of Christ pleads for those awaiting birth, bleeds for them. We believe Christ died *for* the unborn, that it is his will that "they live and come to know him.

The Apostle Paul wrote that dreadful sentence: "(God) made him to be sin who did not know sin..." (II Cor 5/21). Jesus not only takes away the sins of the world, he takes on himself the world's sins. The horror of the flood tide of abortions drowns him as he agonizes in the Garden. Life is cheapened and bargained away in the womb for greater ease, for some bauble of consumer goods, selfishness of one kind or another.

Passionists must be accompany the Son of God in his bloody sweat in the Garden and in his agonizing in soul a body on the cross, Passionists need to see abortions as the dying Christ sees them and comprehend the injustice to the unborn, the guilt and malice of the perpetrators, women who refuse to give birth, doctors become merchants of death, legislators clinging to careers.

Christ died to expiate the sins, he died to bring conversion to the sinners. Passionists need to share Christ's sorrowing Heart. Passionists need to be steadfast in declaring the evil of abortion. But Passionists also need to speak of the forgiving Heart of Christ. Sorrow and repentance are fitting attitudes, despair and depression have no place. Our God is a forgiving God. A Passionist needs to proclaim the Christ of Calvary is the one who suffered for sin, but equally he is the one who brings forgiveness.

The sin of abortion and its relevance to the Son of God makes it relevant to the Passionist as well. It needs to invade his prayer enflame his zeal. If he is a preacher, a missionary he needs to be sure he is giving out the true message in love.

Passionists are called to strengthen the effort of those who strive to turn back the tide of abortions whether in writing or active protests and political activity. Here are issues in which the teaching of Christ and the Cross of Christ have place in the ballot box. Abortion is certain one such issue.

### **Death Penalty**

The survival and well being of any community of human beings stand in need of protection from both those who would harm it from the outside as well as from the members of the group who do harm to other members. It was soon discovered that action by the aggrieved parties resulted in profound disorder. Accordingly, some authority in the group had to look out for the good of all.

What was to be done to the malefactor? Primitive justice was swift and personal. It would usually be exile, a severe beating or frequently death. Right into the Middle Ages murder, stealing, rape would be punished by death. Hanging was normal, but the museums reveal a gruesome array of ways to enact the death penalty against the condemned, such as The Iron Maiden.

English Law exacted the death penalty for a long lists of offenses - killing a rabbit, stealing an item valued at 5 shillings. \$1.25 in today's currency. Of course, its purchasing power was much greater in 1800.

In the early 1800s, something between 2,000 - 3,000 hangings took place in England. The Papal States used capital punishment to eliminate banditry and insurgency during the time of the struggles for unification right into the 19th century. In the previous century, St. Paul of the Cross appointed Passionists to prepare condemned men to meet death.

The 1800s saw improvement in public consciousness of the evils of slaver and the beginnings *or* a movement to remove or limit the use capital punishment in criminal law. In the 20th century many jurisdictions did away with the death sentence.

The question of the morality of executing criminals is much debated in our time. When the Catholic Catechism was issued, the first edition recognized the legitimacy of capital punishment, but subsequently Pope John Paul II insisted the only in exceptional instances did the use of the death penalty measure up to the demands of Christian morality.

The debate continues. The arguments are loud. The large scale atrocities of 9/11, Iraq, Kosovo and Darfur are all part of the debate. The strong statement of Pope John Paul II carries much weight but apparently does not decide the issue for every present situation.

Once more we ask ourselves whether as Passionists we ought to have convictions and opinions in this area.

The Lord Jesus Christ came to redeem us. That was the eternal Plan of God. But the way his death came about was through a judicial process, a trial of sorts followed with a condemnation to the cross. The Evangelists tell of the apparent failures on the part of Caiphas, the Sanhedrin, and Pilate to abide by the laws they were abusing. But Jesus appears in the role of a radical insurgent, an enemy of the establishment, an enemy of the peace.

And even on the cross, Jesus seems to bear witness against death-dealing in the name of justice. He seems to protest against his own sentence - "They know not what they are doing." grants salvation to a codefendant - a repentant murdering, insurgent.

The whole scene shouts: "This is wrong, it ought not be."

For nearly 300 years Christians would be possible objects of persecution with many dying for their faith. The regimes that followed gradually became Christian and did little to change the civil law regarding crime and punishment. Torture and death sentences were the norm.

The barbarians took centuries to acquire the faith, the right of the civil law to punish crime was taken for granted. History shows that the use of the death penalty was universal.

Now we are asking "Do we now need to take a stand on this issue?"

There is no question that in our private lives we are required to forgive if we wish to be forgiven. That would oblige the victims of murder. But can the public at large, the State decree the death of the murderer? 100 years ago we would have no qualms. We might have urged clemency, but we would not have denied the rightfulness of the death sentence, granting guilt was clear.

But if we agree that today we can be sure that criminal behavior can be controlled by life sentences, and possibly rehabilitation, does that take the right to execute away from us? The question can be and is argued. But as Passionists do we have special considerations?

We know the extent to which Christ demands that we as persons extend forgiveness to those who do us harm. "Pray for your persecutors". Not easy, but as Christians, as those dedicated to the love that took the Son of God to the Cross praying for the sinners who did him to death, what is our attitude?

We cannot be vindictive. We cannot want to hurt the perpetrator as much as possible, to make him or her suffer, to shame them and inflict pain for the pain they gave us. We cannot want their damnation.

We cannot rejoice that the State is doing what we cannot - we cannot want the perpetrator removed from our sight as tho they were a venomous bug. They have immortal souls for which Christ died. If we want forgiveness from the Christ we know we have wounded on that cross, we cannot will ill to our enemy - our brother.

The dying Christ prays for us - the dying Christ pray for them.

## Catholic Social Teaching on the Integrity of Life

### 1. Integrity of Life:

*Life, especially human life, belongs to God; whoever attacks human life attacks God's very self.*

Evangelium Vitae, 9

### 2. Abortion:

*God, the Lord of life, has conferred on men the surpassing ministry of safeguarding life in a manner which is worthy of man. Therefore from the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes.*

Gaudium et Spes, 51

### 3. Death Penalty:

*Among the signs of hope... there is evidence of a growing public opposition to the death penalty, even when such a penalty is seen as a kind of "legitimate defence" on the part of society. Modern society in fact has the means of effectively suppressing crime by rendering criminals harmless without definitively denying them the chance to reform.*

Evangelium Vitae, 27