

Why the ‘Passionist’ in Passionist Family Groups?



There are two types of priests in the church: **Diocesan** and **Religious**.

Those who wish to become **Diocesan** priests normally join their local diocese and remain within that diocese for the rest of their (priestly) lives. They are at the service of the local Bishop, and most are appointed to parish ministry. A few specialise in theology or administration.

Those who become **Religious Order** priests join a particular Congregation and make religious profession prior to ordination. During their life as priests they are at the service of their Congregation or Order, led by a Provincial. They may be appointed to parish ministry, but most often they are appointed to some other ministry and they live in the dioceses to which they are appointed. Unlike diocesan priests, they might never live and minister in the diocese in which they lived before becoming a priest. Some religious Congregations have brothers as well as priests among their members. These brothers minister in a variety of areas such as household works, education, faith formation, nursing, administration etc.

Among the better known Congregations are Marists, Franciscans, Jesuits, Dominicans, Salesians, Diving Word Missionaries, Redemptorists and Passionists. Apart from these Congregations, there are also religious congregations of Brothers and Congregations of Sisters. Well known Orders of this kind include Christian Brothers, De La Salle Brothers, St John of God Brothers, Marist Brothers and Sisters of Charity, Sisters of Mercy, Sisters of St Joseph (Josephites), Sisters of Our Lady of the Mission, Daughters of Compassion and Carmelites.

Each religious Congregation has its own distinctive gift or charism and this determines the kind of life and mission the members live and proclaim. Often this charism is expressed in a particular vow that the members take, along with the three vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience which all religious make. Passionists take a vow to promote the living memory of the Passion of Jesus in the hearts of people.

In the years following Vatican 2 each religious Congregation was asked to renew its way of life by returning to the spirit and charism of their founder. One result of this was a significant departure of members of every Congregation perhaps signalling that religious life for some, had become ‘safe and sure’ rather than ‘bold and challenging’. Founders of religious orders, such as Mary McKillop had a brave vision, and often they met with opposition from church authorities.

Religious profession was once equated with ‘a life of perfection’ There was a sense that this ‘perfection’ could be achieved by ‘doing it right’. ‘Keep the rule and the rule will keep you’. Behind this mentality was a suggestion that religious life could help a person ‘become perfect’. In

much the same way, Catholics attending Sunday Mass, observing the nine first Fridays' and attending to other common religious practices were deemed to be 'on the right road'. Although many religious and laity lived heroic faith filled lives, this path to perfection doesn't seem to have worked for too many people!

Some religious saw their choice as guaranteeing a 'reward'. All they had to do was 'do things right'. Some saw it as inheriting the 'hundredfold' (Mk 10:30). This attitude meant that sometimes it did not require any risk taking or any initiative. Perhaps such people were like the man who buried his talent in the ground (Luke 19:20).

Those who made the choice of a 'dedicated' life, came to be viewed as 'superior' to other Christians. In much the same way, certain Catholics looked down their noses at others who were seemingly 'lost'. Such Catholics failed to appreciate the message of the story of the Pharisee and publican (Luke 18:9-14).

Keeping external practices seduced some into believing this was responding to the gospel call. This was a mistake many Christians made too, and they resented the changes called for by Vatican 2.

The new thinking and theology of the 2nd Vatican Council did not necessarily change everything, but it reminded us all that our first vocation is **Baptism**. Every Christian is called to holiness. This does not mean piety or aloofness, but simply reflecting God's goodness, which we share in.

Other thinking (e.g. scientific) invites us into a deeper appreciation of what Christian life . We must appreciate that we are called to be Christian disciples. This is not just an individual calling. It is a call into community.

Even back in the early 13th century, St Francis had lay Franciscans and there have been various 'third-Orders' that allowed lay people to share in the spirit of an Order. Today the charism (or founding spirit) of religious Congregations is being shared everywhere by laity who are sometimes made official Associates of a Congregation. Many of these associates are young. This move has meant that more people are seeking to understand the distinctive character of religious with whom they have an association. In order to do this it is necessary to understand something of the background of the person who founded the Congregation, the times in which he or she lived and the vision they had for those who were to join them.

The founder of the Passionists was an Italian Paul Danei, known as St Paul of the Cross. In order to understand the distinctive spirit of the Passionists today, it is necessary to understand the times in which Paul lived (1694-1775) and what he was seeking to achieve by starting a Congregation. Doing this enables those who carry the spirit today (Professed, Companions, Associates and Co-workers) to carry out their ministry with that same dynamic spirit and charism.

Paul had a profound experience as a young man that God loved him personally. His entire life was dominated by a desire to share this conviction, especially with those who were so burdened by poverty and illiteracy that they ignored by the clergy or they never heard the gospel message of God's love. Paul believed the most overwhelming sign of God's love was the Passion of Jesus, so this was the foundation of his teaching and preaching. He wanted people to know that God loved and cared for them. His message was so profoundly compassionate that he was accused by one cleric of his time of "giving people an armchair ride to heaven"!

More than focusing of the Passion or sufferings of Jesus, Paul focused on Jesus' poverty, as expressed by St Paul the Apostle in Philippians 2:5-11. This was a pverty of voluntary self-emptying ('kenosis') so as to be filled (rich) with God.

Paul has been described by some as the greatest missionary of the 18th century, and my others as it's greatest contemplative and mystic. Normally people think of these characteristics as exclusive to one another, but Paul's genius' was to see that active mission life without profound contemplation, was shallow. His rule of life ensured both dimensions were present.

Paul was also well known for speaking in a plain and practical way and in his Rule he wrote that Passionists may not preach in a lofty manner. They must speak in plain words that the people can understand. This demand has had a significant effect on Passionist spirituality and explains why people often see Passionists as practical or 'down to earth'.

It is this gift that Passionist spirituality ahs given to the PFGM. The Passionist logo and the PFGM logo express this connection.



The Passionist logo has the words 'The Passion of Jesus' (written in Latin and Greek) enshrined in a heart and with the three nails below the words. Placed above and inserted into the heart is the cross, illustrating that it is the greatest sign of God's love. When the PFG's began in the then Passionist parish of Terrey Hills, the people decided in their logo to have the cross inside the heart alongside a number of people who represented an extended family. This was to represent that they would carry each other's crosses. Underneath the logo, the words 'A Family for All' signified that anyone could share in and belong to this family.

The spirituality that supports and animates PFG's is a 'spirituality of the ordinary'. Unfortunately, some people just don't get it. Some people think unless people are saying prayers or reading the Bible, they are not doing anything religious. Jesus said "wherever two or more are gathered in my name, I am there with them". So we believe Jesus is present and active at a PFG B-B-Q. Whenever people gather and welcome or reach out to others, they are building relationships in a Christ-like way.

Despite the fact that even some members can think PFG's is all about monthly get togethers, we are not seeking to organise such functions. The monthly functions are vehicles for people coming together and growing a family spirit. It is in community that we experience love and communicate it. Jesus called it 'the Kingdom of God'. It is a Family for All. It is a family that accepts, reaches out and includes others.

The first Passionist foundation was a mission of Italian Passionists who worked among the aborigines on Stradbroke Island off the coast from Brisbane, in 1843. This mission failed. A second foundation to Australia was made in 1887. Fr Seraphim McIvor, was the first Passionist to be ordained in Australia, in 1892. He was drowned when a ship sank off Auckland in 1894. Seraphim had been sent to engage in a series of parish missions with Fr Hillary who was already in Auckland engaged in Missions. There is a plaque on Great Barrier Island to commemorate Seraphim. This means that Passionists have been engaged in ministry in New Zealand at least as early as 1894. In 1900 Fr Francis Clune CP and VC, gave a Mission in Hamilton.

Throughout the ensuing years a number of Passionists from the Australian Province worked in New Zealand giving retreats and missions. The English/Irish Province was asked to take responsibility for New Zealand because of their ability with Missions and Retreats. A community and small Retreat house was established in Hamilton on 26th June 1960, and during the opening speech the Archbishop recalled Passionists from Australia had been coming for 60 years to give missions and retreats.

The Australian Province took over responsibility for New Zealand in September 1966. Two years later, Aidan Kay became the first Passionist to be ordained in New Zealand. Since that time, Tony Cleary (RIP), Pat McIndoe (currently in PNG), and Peter Gaughan (currently in Sydney) have been ordained. Gerard Glynn (currently in Sydney) was ordained in 1959. John McGeachie (currently in PNG) was professed a Passionist Brother in 1965.

The Retreat House in Hamilton was a principal ministry for the Passionists in New Zealand from 1960 until 1988. Passionists also conducted parish missions and retreats throughout the country during that time. Sometimes these were conducted by the men living in Hamilton. At other times, Passionists from Australia travelled to New Zealand for a series of parish missions.

A decision was taken to close the Hamilton community, and this took effect in June 1988. In that same week the Passionist Family Group Movement was established in Paeroa and East Coast Bays, Auckland.

The PFGM was founded in 1973 in Terrey Hills. It first moved out to another parish ten years later in 1983 and came to New Zealand in 1988, twenty-four years ago. This was the same year the Passionists closed their only community in New Zealand, in Hamilton. However, the PFGM has been sustained and supported in Aotearoa since 1988 by Passionists and many dedicated laity who carry the Passionist spirit. There has been ongoing leadership formation throughout all those years.

No Christian will be perfect! But then, we are not asked to be! We are asked to be disciples – **learners**. We will always depend on God. This is an important distinction between how we might have once lived our spiritual life and how we are called to live it now. We are not called to be perfect! Doing that, seduces us into thinking that it is all our good work or our effort. Then God is left out.

Our greatest lessons are learned through **failure**. This is how we come to God. God loves us as we are, not because of anything we do or achieve. God doesn't love us more, because we are perfect. God loves us! We are called to learn to love others like that, without conditions. We don't have to live a system of rewards. Community is like any family. We disappoint each other, display our weaknesses, become impatient, act in strange ways. We fail. This happens between marriage partners and within families.

Can we love one another as God loves us or will we withhold our love? Will we profess our Christian life by making a public commitment, but act differently; holding grudges, speaking ill of each other, withholding our assistance? Our commitment comes to life in relationships. We profess our life **in community**.

Most of us grew up in the world dominated by the thinking of Issac Newton which led to a **mechanical** approach to life. One theologian suggested that in Newton's world, God had created a machine and that God is like a night watchman watching how this machine works. In this world view, we thought we could control, fix or replace the machine parts, and in so doing we emphasised the parts (individual), over the whole (community). In religious life or Christian life in general, this sometimes meant that we learned the rules in order to minimize personal loss (avoid hell) and maximize personal gain (achieve heaven).

Today, quantum physics and chaos theory are providing a new theology that emphasizes God's ever present action, the inter-connectedness of all things and the belief that everything that occurs, random as it seems, destructive as it seems, is in fact working for ultimate life.

This of course, echoes Paul's words, who himself suffered a great deal, but who suggests that when someone knows and loves God they can understand how "*all things work together for good*". (Romans 8:28)

The universe has existed for 13.7 billion years and life on earth for 4.5 billion years. Our human time in all this history is incredibly brief. Within the development of the human story as well as in every other aspect of the life of our universe, life and death has been the ongoing pattern.

The paradigm that Jesus lived, is that God overcomes death and gives it meaning. Death is not the end. Suffering and pain are not without meaning.

There is always something awaiting. ‘Letting go’ is life’s lesson to be learned. Even as we reflect on ageing issues, we are invited to this faith stance...’can I, will I, put my life in God’s hands’?

Most often, as in chaos theory, we cannot see the pattern, but there is always a return to order from chaos. Photographs of snowflake crystals dazzle with their incredible beautiful and intricate patterns. Patterns emerge, it seems, from every situation, even though we do not always see or recognize them.

Our earth was created by a dying star. Had that star not died, we would never have known this life. Death is all around us, and therefore, so is new life. Every second, the sun loses four billion kilograms of mass. The sun is dying and in so doing, its sustains life on earth. Without that dying gift (of the sun) we would not have life.

This pattern of death and life is all around us. We see in the seasons. We can see it in nature documentaries that are full of the death and life pattern.

The trials, challenges and struggles we face will be brought to good by the God who loves us. We can face diminishment or the decline in church attenders or our PFG’s with hope and confidence, knowing our vocation is to be faithful to dying, and that we can have full trust in God as Jesus did. There will be resurrection, not of our making, but of God’s making.

St Paul wrote, *All I want, is to reproduce in my life, the pattern of His death* (Phil 3: 10). This is our vocation as Christians. In our daily lives we are called to lay down our lives for others, to forget our selves and think of others, to be prepared always to take the initiative. Baptism is not a passport to heaven. It is a commitment to join with other disciples on a journey. That journey is not to a place, or to a way of doing things; it is to a person, Jesus. Passionist Family Group life, offers us a way of living and sharing that journey with others.

- 1. What attracted you to PFG’s?**
- 2. Can you identify the Passionist spirit or charism within yourself?**
- 3. How would you explain it?**

Brian Traynor CP