

Saints with a Devotion to the Passion of Jesus Christ

Claire Dwyer

Have you ever had the feeling that a particular saint was tapping you on the shoulder, and trying to get your attention? Well, I've had that experience this year, with St. Paul of the Cross, and so, I'm really excited to be talking about his life, along with the life of St. Teresa of Avila, and St. Gemma Galgani, especially as relates to their devotion to the passion of Jesus Christ. My name is Claire Dwyer, so let's dive right in.

Who was St. Paul of the Cross?

Who was St. Paul of the Cross? He's not that well known, although he was a founder of a major religious order. He was born in Aveda, Italy, in 1694 to a noble family. But at the time of his birth, they'd been reduced to poverty, and they also knew suffering in another way, too, because while Paul was the second of 16 children, 11 of them died in infancy. So you know what that means? It means that the family knew suffering, in a very personal and intense way, but it was St. Paul's mother who first introduced to him what Christian hope and joy looked like, in the face of suffering.

A Life of Radical Penitence

It was actually a priest though, when he was 19 years old, who would influence him, and invite him to make, first of all, a life confession, and secondly, an act of surrender to the will of God, which Paul did. But he wasn't sure, at first, exactly what God was asking him to do after that. So he joined the Crusades, and then, after that, he joined the family business. Finally, he realized that the Lord was calling him to something else. The Lord was calling him to a life of radical penitence, but a life of radical penitence that was not to be lived alone. You know, as an aside, this kind of reminds me of the disciples after the resurrection, when they just didn't know what to do, and so, they just did what they knew how to do, and that was go fishing, until the Lord actually called them to something else.

Anyway, here was St. Paul, you know, called to this new thing, at the young age of 26. He was convinced that the Lord wanted him to found a brand new religious order, which was to be called the "Poor of Jesus". His brother, his own brother, was actually the first to join him into the, so the two brothers moved to Rome, where Paul hoped that it would be easier for him to get approval for the new community that he had in mind. Well, it was in Rome that they encountered, very personally and intimately, in a new way, the suffering of humanity, because they were volunteering at a hospital, caring for the physical needs

of the sick, and the spiritual needs of the sick, and their caregivers, while they were in Rome, they weren't just getting an education in human suffering. They were actually studying for the priesthood, too. And they would both be ordained by Pope Benedict the 13th in St. Peter's Basilica, on June 7th, 1727.

The Congregation of the Most Holy Cross and Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ

Eventually, Paul and his brother would want to get away from the big city, and they would move to a Hermitage in Tuscany. However, they soon had to make plans to build a new church, and a new monastery, because of the large numbers of men who wanted to join them in following their austere rule, which was finally approved, 20 years after Paul wrote it, by the Pope, in 1741. And at that time, the name of their congregation became the Congregation of the Most Holy Cross and Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, which is a name that expressed perfectly the mission and the charism of this brand new order. Its members were to contemplate and preach the cross and passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. To the degree that, to this day, each Passionist takes a fourth vow. So in addition to the traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, a Passionist vows to preach Christ crucified in a special way.

And so, the Passionist revealed to us, that when we preach Christ crucified with the, along with the evangelist St. Paul, who, which was, not surprisingly, a favorite of St. Paul of the Cross, when we boast as St. Paul did in the cross of Christ, when we become Christ-centered, then our lives take on a new kind of depth. And our spirituality takes on a new kind of power, because we let the cross of Christ triumph, not only in the world and not only in salvation history, but in our own lives, and in our own history.

Letters of Spiritual Direction

Now, we have about 2000 letters that St. Paul wrote personally, to many people. He wrote to bishops, priests, religious, he even wrote to Popes, but he primarily wrote to just ordinary, working class, lay people. Most of the letters that are preserved of his are letters of spiritual direction that he would write after a busy day, late into the night, and repeatedly, he would counsel his directives, that their meditative prayer must begin with the humanity of Christ, especially Christ in his passion. We're going to talk more about that in a little bit, but among the Passionists now, are women religious, as well, because St. Paul of the Cross also started an order for women, the Passionist nuns, who support all of the apostolic work of the Passionist priests, through their prayers and their sacrifice.

St. Paul of the Cross died October 18th in 1775, and he was canonized almost 100 years later, in 1867. Now, we normally, as you know, celebrate the feast days on the day of the Saint's death, or as close to it as possible. Now because October 18th was already the

feast day of St. Luke, who's a heavy hitter, and takes precedence, St. Paul's Feast Day is celebrated on October 19th, except in the United States, where it's trumped by the feast of the North American martyrs. And so, we celebrate his feast day on October 20th, in the United States. At the time that he died, the Passionists had over 200 members, living in 12 different retreats or monasteries, and now there are over 2000 Passionists in the world, including about 1400 priests.

St. Teresa of Avila

Okay, among St. Paul's favorite authors were the great spiritual teachers and writers. He loved St. Francis de Sales. He liked St. John of the Cross, and he loved St. Teresa of Avila. And I want to talk now, about that connection with St. Teresa of Avila for just a few moments. St. Teresa of Avila, as you know was the first woman named a Doctor of the Church in 1970, and she's well known for her teaching on prayer, and for having such a tremendous impact on our collective understanding of the spiritual life. St. Teresa's influence is apparent in Paul's entries in his own spiritual diary, but she also makes an appearance in about 40 of his spiritual direction letters. So we know that she had a profound impact on him.

A Defining Moment for St. Teresa of Avila

St. Teresa of Avila herself experienced her own deeper, second conversion through an image of the suffering Christ. And from then on, she urged her followers to never, ever forget the humanity and suffering of Jesus Christ. Here's what happened to her. It was in the convent one day, and she just came across a statue of Jesus, scourged and wounded, the image of Ecce Homo, behold, the man, as Pontius Pilate said, you know, showing them this bruised, and wounded, and scourged, and bleeding Jesus Christ. And she said that, as she beheld that image, she was forever changed. And these are her own words, she writes, *"It happened that, entering the oratory one day, I saw an image which had been procured for a certain festival that was observed in the house, and had been taken there, to be kept for that purpose. It represented Christ sorely wounded, and so conducive was it to devotion, that when I looked at it, I was deeply moved to see Him thus.*

So well did it picture what He suffered for us, so great was my distress when I thought how ill I had repaid Him for those wounds, that I felt as if my heart were breaking, and I threw myself down beside Him, shedding floods of tears, and begging Him to give me strength, once and for all, so that I would not rise from that spot, until He had granted me what I was beseeching of Him. And I felt sure that this did me good, for, from that time onward, I began to improve in prayer and virtue,"

Because, up until that point, honestly, by her own admission, St. Teresa of Avila was kind of a half-hearted, lukewarm nun. She loved the Lord, but she also loved hanging out,

and having conversations in the parlor. She had not been very devoted to her prayer, and had really neglected it for an extended length of time. And so this encounter with the suffering Christ was a defining moment for her. For that reason, she would ever after hold that the contemplation of Jesus' humanity, that is, meditating on it, thinking about it, praying with it, entering into it, especially in His passion, is never to be left behind, even if the heights of prayer, and this summit of contemplation is attained. She writes, *"I have seen clearly that it is this, by this door that we must enter, if we wish his sovereign majesty to show us great secrets in the interior castle."*

St. Teresa contradicts the opinion that, after having reached a certain stage of prayer, a person may meditate alone on the Godhead, just the Trinity in general, leaving behind the humanity of Christ. She warns her sisters not to give any credence to people holding such false opinions. And, in his book on the interior castle, called *The Devil in the Castle*, Dan Burke writes that, quote, *"St. Teresa's contention here is that, even if the soul experiences this simpler, contemplative prayer, it should never fail to give time for its heart and mind to ponder on the suffering of Jesus. She notes that some have tried to convince her that there is a point at which one progresses to such a place where there is no longer need to receive any bene, or receive any benefit from meditating on the passion of Jesus. Her assertion is that this is not only wrong, but in fact, is an attempted deception of the enemy of souls,"* end quote.

And St. Paul of the Cross, following in those footsteps, would write, *"It's true that this memory of the sacred passion of Jesus Christ and the imitation of his holy virtues should never be left aside, even after having attained a great degree of recollection, and having reached a very high degree of prayer, the Passion still remains the door through which the soul enters into union with God to profound recollection and true contemplation."* And so you can see that St. Teresa of Avila really had an impact on the writings and understanding and practice of St. Paul of the Cross.

St. Gemma Galgani

St. Gemma Galgani was an Italian woman who died at the age of 25. And, from her childhood, she had a great devotion to the Passion. She's another beautiful story of a woman consumed by the desire to enter into the sufferings of Christ, not only in her prayer, but actually even in her physicality because she was a victim's soul, who suffered with Christ in his Passion. She was an incredible mystic, who actually received the stigmata, the wounds of Christ, on her own body. And in her later years, would actually participate in the Passion of Christ, every week from Thursday night, until about three o'clock every Friday afternoon.

St. Gemma Galgani is a favorite of mine. In fact, my daughter is named after her. And one day my daughter, Gemma, came home from school with an assignment to write about St. Paul of the Cross. I told you, he was tapping me on my shoulder, especially since I had actually been publishing some excerpts of his letters, and contributors reflections on them, on my website, for work.

A Desire to be a Passionist Nun

Well, in my daughter's research on St. Paul of the Cross, she discovered that St. Gemma had always desired deeply to be a Passionist nun, and join the order founded by St. Paul of the Cross, because she was so drawn, naturally, to the charism of that suffering and passion of Jesus Christ. And there was a Passionist convent only about 200 miles from her home. So she asked to be admitted there, and her spiritual director asked, on her behalf, that she be admitted there, but in part, because of a lot of physical sufferings that St. Gemma had, she was denied the opportunity to enter the convent. This would be a really severe suffering for her. But she predicted accurately that a Passionist convent would be founded in her hometown of Luca, after her death.

"I no longer ask to enter a convent. Jesus has the habit of a Passionist nun waiting for me at the gates of heaven. Let me die, so that the Passionist convent may be established," she said, and the convent was, in fact, underway within two years of her death. And she's buried there today. So what was denied her in life, was actually granted her in death, which occurred appropriately on Holy Saturday, the year of 1903, which occurred on April 11th.

Pope Benedict the 15th, in the decree introducing the cause of her beatification, said, "the pious virgin, Gemma Galgani, if not by heaven in profession, undoubtedly by desire and affection, is rightly numbered among the religious children of St. Paul of the Cross." God is so good like that, isn't he? Often granting us the desires of our hearts, which, remember, He placed there Himself, in ways that we, at the time, cannot imagine. And so, our frustrations, and our delays can prove to be fruitful beyond all of our hopes.

By the way, if you haven't watched my talk on St. Gianna yet, be sure to listen all the way to the end, and see how her dreams in life actually came true after she died, as well. It's a good story. And St. Gemma is a great saint and intercessor. I actually just read a post that an exorcist wrote who was explaining about how powerful the prayers of St. Gemma Galgani are in deliverance ministry. So go to St. Gemma, and ask for her help in all of your trials. Ask for her help in spiritual warfare, in your own protection, and your family's protection, and ask for her help in your prayer time this Lent, so that you can really enter into, appreciate, and even suffer with Jesus Christ in his agony. Lent is a time of drawing near to the humanity of Jesus Christ, and His vulnerability, and in His suffering, and in His death.

Drawing us Closer to the Passion of Christ

But these saints, in particular, who have this charism for drawing us, ever deeper, into the Passion of Jesus Christ, and reminding us, we can never leave it alone, and never abandon it, teach us that it's always something we need to keep in the forefront of our minds and our hearts. We can never stop calling to mind what the Lord did for us on the cross. And what a precious, and painful, and personal thing it is. It is something that can never be left behind. It has to be imprinted on us, branded on us. It has to be a, it has to be a part of us, not as a sign of death, ultimately, but as a sign of triumph, and, ultimately, of love. And so may we, this Lent, be reminded of this reality, and recommit ourselves to reverencing the humanity and the suffering of Jesus Christ. So St. Paul of the Cross, and St. Teresa of Avila, and St. Gemma Galgani, pray for us.