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Congregation of Nuns of the Passion of Jesus Christ

## *Consolidation of Monasteries: a Paschal Mystery*

***“Unless a grain of wheat dies...”***

Shortly after Easter 2022, a Passionist Nun was writing to a Passionist priest, and she began with these words: “Reciprocating your good wishes, we inform you that as a community of Genoa we no longer exist.”

Wait! To say: “We no longer exist” – doesn’t this sound maybe like a very sad story, dictated by impersonal new norms promulgated by the Holy See for women’s contemplative communities? It is possible to look at it that way, and many are choosing to do so. But there is a better possibility. As Christians, if we shine the light of the Paschal Mystery of Jesus on this story, what we will discover is cause for astonishment, thanksgiving and joy. So, let’s hear the rest of the story.

Sister’s letter continued: “The grain of wheat died in order to be reborn as a single new community together with the community of the Monastery-Sanctuary of St. Gemma Galgani in Lucca. This year we have experienced the mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection more closely by living this passover ‘on our skin’. And amazement always takes hold of us when we discover the truth of the words of the Gospel! For us, John 12:24 is now a lived reality! ‘Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.’

“How I wish that other Sisters could also understand that it is preferable to ‘die and be reborn’ as a stronger community, rather than merely trying to survive as a fragile community because we don’t want to change places and habits. Of course, detachment is painful, as every death entails pain. Nevertheless, just as the birth of a new life makes us forget the suffering and labor of childbirth, so the birth of a new community has let us touch renewed joy, mutual acceptance, the possibility of a more well-prepared liturgy and daily times of peaceful and constant prayer---all the things that a fragile community for various reasons risks not being able to live. We bless the Lord for this gift of consolidation, and as we offer him the inevitable difficulties of physical and spiritual adaptation to the new situation, we enjoy the fruits received.”

***“It is preferable to die and to be reborn...”***

Over the course of three years, the superior of the Passionist community in Genova-Quarto, Mother Teresa Carzino, repeatedly expressed concern about the lack of vital autonomy in her monastery. The Genova community had a sufficient number of Nuns, but lacked personnel qualified for leadership and formation, and in fact had not

had a final profession in 35 years. The three youngest Nuns were basically carrying all the duties of keeping the monastery going, with the consequent sense of being overwhelmed despite the help of 3 lay employees and several volunteers. Taking Mother Teresa's concerns to heart, the Mother President of our newly-formed Monastic Congregation, together with her General Council, undertook an exploration of options for solving the dilemma, all the while imploring the Mother of God to "solve what we cannot solve." The dialog between the General Council and the Genova superior continued throughout this time.

We believe Mary's answer came on the Solemnity of her Assumption into heaven in 2021. On that day, the Mother President and two of her council members decided to propose to the superior of Genova the only solution that seemed feasible to us—that is, that the entire community of Genova would be consolidated with the community of Lucca. This entailed, of course, the closure of the beautiful, seaside monastery of Genova, requiring a profound detachment for each Nun. In spite of the difficulties, however, Mother Teresa's face lit up with joy as she listened to the proposal and then said: "While you proposed this solution, I myself felt it as desirable, because whenever I came for retreats in Lucca, I have always felt great peace."

Through a sincere search for the will of the Father and a desire to be obedient to the Church, this union of mind and heart was a special gift from Mary, the Queen of the Paschal Mystery and the one who knows how to "solve what we cannot solve." From that moment on, a brilliant yet warm and gentle illumination guided us, lighting up the solution heaven desired. The Lucca superior and community were very open to this possibility, and the Genova Chapter members reached a unanimous favorable decision. We felt that Mary Assumed into Heaven had made known to us "heaven's solution." A unanimous decision, however, did not exempt the Genova Nuns from feeling "on their skin" the normal emotions of loss, sorrow, insecurity, etc. Nevertheless, a gentle spirit of faith-filled obedience to the Church prevailed in their hearts. Gradually, over the course of four months, all the Genova Nuns moved to Lucca until everyone had completed their community "passover."

Among the 8 Passionist Nuns of Genova there were two French sisters, who in 2017 had undergone a preview of their Genova experience when their monastery in Mamers, France was closed and they transferred to the community of Genova. These two Nuns became a great encouragement to all the others. In fact, Sr. Marie Bernard exhorted them by saying: "We must unite and become stronger communities, so that we live our vocation better!"

***"If it dies, it produces much fruit..."***

The Genova Nuns brought into the Lucca community a sense of newness and hope, vital energy, deepened prayerfulness, and enhanced liturgy as they shared their musical gifts with us. This Paschal story is too rich for us to recount all the fruits, but we can highlight a few of the blessings in the words of the Nuns themselves:



*"The news of this transfer was a real death for me. I felt fear, restlessness, mistrust, which I tried to fight, but did not overcome completely, while clinging to doing God's will. When I arrived at the Monastery of Lucca everything was transformed. I was welcomed with true fraternal love by Mother Monica and the Sisters. I felt 'at home' in my Monastery, as in the one I had left in Genova.*

*The fruits of the Spirit – ‘love, joy, peace...’ flourished (Gal, 5,22). I experience that God's love fills us all and generates unity among us. I rejoice in serving the Lord and the Sisters concretely every day. I feel a great inner peace knowing that I am where Jesus wants me to be. This is a miracle of the Merciful Love that accompanies our community. I can only rejoice and thank Christ Crucified and Risen!”*

*“...I feel more tranquil, more at peace from the moment when the sisters from Genova arrived, because [now] there are so many of us; therefore, the strength of living together is felt much more. Even if I had a little difficulty at the beginning in the adaptation, yet slowly it seems that we have been living together for several years already.”*

*“When you said that the Sisters from Genova were coming, I immediately felt as if we had always seen them with us and I thought ‘but look how we love each other’. This is a grace of God. To be so open, without prejudices, we live serene and tranquil, and we talk to each other as if we had always [known each other]. This for me is the fruit of the Easter Spirit: to love each other, to treat each other with cordiality, respect, mutual love”.*

***“What is the greatest fruit of the Spirit that we have experienced by living the Paschal Mystery in welcoming the community of Genova.....? It was and is for me a true Easter Experience. It started with a simple: ‘yes, let's welcome them!’ For me everything started from this yes and then the living Jesus, through the presence of the Sisters of Genova-Quarto, entered our community. I feel like saying: the living Jesus came to visit us! We have simply welcomed him....”***

*“I thank you for [this] opportunity...to be able to express my experience of my transfer from my monastery in Genova to this one in Lucca. I have found all the sisters very welcoming and available to each one of us and I sincerely note much affability that makes me think of the first Christians who distinguished themselves in charity as the transparency of Jesus. I also feel so much emotion for the fervor and richness that they communicate in the Sacred Liturgy and from this there is all the support for our communion with Jesus.”*



**To read all the testimonies of the consolidated Lucca community, please check our Monastic Congregation website: [www.passionistemonache.com](http://www.passionistemonache.com)**

### ***An added surprise***

For 44 years, the Lucca community itself had been struggling to survive the loss of elderly and sick Nuns and the lack of persevering vocations. While the number of Nuns in the community was sufficient to qualify for numerical autonomy, there was a lack of personnel prepared for and capable of leadership and formation roles. In 2018 the Holy See appointed a “pro tempore” superior from our monastery in Whitesville, KY (USA). Although five younger Indonesian Nuns were also there to help and were literally keeping the monastery “afloat,” the future looked dim and offered little hope.

Then in 2019, when the Lucca superior was elected as Mother President, she appointed as superior of Lucca Sr. Monica Graffonara from our monastery of Loreto. This was a real sacrifice for the Loreto Nuns, but it immediately began to bear fruit, fruit that we could not have imagined. All we knew at the time was that Jesus Himself had asked St. Gemma for a monastery of Passionist Nuns to be founded in Lucca. Yet, without vocations for so many years, we were left with the painful question: “Then why is Jesus not sending us vocations?”



Throughout the time of discernment and then the consolidation of the Genova and Lucca communities, none of us could have guessed how St. Gemma was quietly at work in the hearts of some young Italian women. Finally, as a great marvel to us all, the consolidated “single” community of Lucca now has a postulant and four young aspirants, with a couple of others on the horizon.

***The time for synergy...to walk in communion***

The Church’s new norms for women’s contemplative life “question” every community to look truthfully at the requisites for genuine autonomy. These documents are not intended, as some have loudly proclaimed in news articles, to destroy contemplative life, but to revitalize it in spirit and in truth. The goal of the consolidation of monasteries is exactly what the word “consolidation” means – to make strong together.

In his commentary on *Vultum Dei Quaerere*, Archbishop José Rodríguez Carballo O.F.M. wrote: *“Contemplatives must be aware of a reality that in many cases is critical. The time for synergy has come, the time to strengthen the sense of belonging to the Church and to the Order itself....We must be well aware that this is the time to walk in communion, to join forces.”*

On behalf of the consolidated community here at St. Gemma’s, we thank the Holy Father, as well as João Braz Card. de Aviz, Prefect of the Vatican Congregation for Religious, and José Rodríguez Carballo, O.F.M., Archbishop Secretary, for giving us *Vultum Dei Quaerere*, *Cor Orans*, and *The Art of Seeking the Face of God: Guidelines for the Formation of Women Contemplatives*.

Yes, the norms in these new documents do call women contemplatives to a mystical dying, but only for the sake of a “mystical rebirth,” as we participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The experience of the Nuns of the new Lucca community are a living testimony to the fruitfulness of the “Paschal Mystery of Consolidation.”

***“...Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit” (John 12:24).***



*Please pray for God’s blessing of new and persevering vocations for Lucca and for all of our Passionist monasteries throughout the world. Thank you.*

**Madre Catherine  
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President of the Congregation of Nuns  
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