

THE RESTORATION OF THE ROOM OF ST. PAUL OF THE CROSS

On 29 June 2017, the Passionist Congregation and the Passionist Family celebrated the 150th Anniversary of the Canonization of our Founder, St. Paul of the Cross, who was canonized by Blessed Pius IX in 1867. In a Circular Letter that Fr. Joachim Rego, Superior General, wrote on 25 March, he encouraged our religious to plan various activities on a local level to mark this event. He also referred to several projects that were being planned here at the Generalate of Sts. John and Paul to mark this Anniversary. Among these was the restoration of the Room where St. Paul of the Cross lived the final years of his life and where he died on October 18, 1775. With the help a major benefactor, and the generosity of other entities and individuals, the main work of this restoration project was completed. As funding becomes available, we hope that additional furnishings will be purchased and other artifacts pertaining to this Room will also be restored.

On Sunday, 02 July, a ceremony and prayer service took place during which the restored Room was blessed and inaugurated. Following this prayer service, there was a concelebrated Mass in the Chapel of St. Paul of the Cross in our Basilica to mark this Anniversary.

A brief history of the preservation of the Room following the death of St. Paul of the Cross

Since 18 October 1775, almost two hundred and fifty years ago, when our Holy Founder died, the room inhabited by him in his final years and the adjoining chapel, where he celebrated Mass have been carefully preserved, along with several items that belonged to him. While awaiting the completion of the cause of his beatification (01 May 1853), various relics of St. Paul of the Cross were displayed for the piety and devotion of our religious and the faithful who visited this site. In early 1853, being certain of the imminent beatification, the superiors quickly worked to prepare this locale, including the all the objects that were associated with the Founder during this final period of his life.

Cardinal Luigi Lambruschini (1776-1854) offered half of the amount of money needed for the work-- 300 scudos. Two days after the beatification, by special privilege, he wanted to be the first to celebrate Mass in that room on the altar that was erected and consecrated several hours before by our

Passionist bishop, Giuseppe Molajoni (1780-1859). A description of the work performed at that time can be found in the "Platea" (record) of the Retreat of Sts. John and Paul. It notes that "the rooms of the Blessed" were "prepared in the nicest and most tasteful manner. An altar erected in the room where the Blessed died, that includes a picture of the Blessed in the moment of ascending into glory, painted by [...] Mr. Gregori... There is also a devout image of the most holy Cross that is believed to have been used by the Blessed when he preached holy missions... The adjacent Chapel, where the Blessed celebrated Mass, is preserved as it was at that time, that is, there is the very altar that the Blessed used with all the decorations that there were at that time: only a few minor objects of decoration and practicality were added to this small chapel".

The Restoration of the Room in 1967

This arrangement remained virtually unchanged for 64 years. During the General Consulta that took place on February 14, 1918, the General Curia examined a proposal for significant changes to the room, given that "after so many years of use it is in so shabby a state that it detracts from devotion and risks dismaying the laity who visit it". Therefore, it was decided, among other things, to cover the walls with a damask cloth, to gold leaf the ceiling and to pave the floor with marble. Thus, it would be similar to "the room of almost all the other Saints who are venerated in the Eternal City which are decorated sumptuously." (Book of the Consultas, 1914-1925, p.149) The work began immediately and was completed before the feast of the Saint, 28 April 1918.

From 1918 until 1967, the room remained virtually untouched. However by 1967, the year of the 100th Anniversary of the Canonization of the Founder, many visitors, including eminent personalities, proposed the idea that a different appearance could be given to the whole setting, so that at least one could understand what it originally looked like. Especially since the damask wall covering was deteriorated, discolored and even torn in several places. Therefore the superiors gradually came to the conclusion that a general and radical restoration of the room was needed, restoring it as much as possible to its original state when the Saint died there.

During the General Consulta of 01 June 1967, an overall restoration plan was prepared and approved. The actual work, which began in August, took several months of careful and delicate work. On October 18, having

completed the restoration work, it was possible to once again celebrate Mass and pray in that room, now completely transformed. The major restoration work addressed the following areas: The walls were completely freed not only from the damask cloths, but also from any other objects or decorations; The wooden ceiling was restored to its original simplicity, eliminating all the ornaments and colored decorations that had been added; The marble floor covering was removed revealing the original red terracotta tiles that remained; The altar that was previously used [in the room] was removed and was replaced with a free standing one of iron and copper; The large crucifix with plaster corpus, that was used by the Saint when he preached missions, was restored to the wall above the altar; The two large display cases that contain the relics of the Saints that were previously placed on the lateral walls were removed and replaced with a free-standing display case; The door and the transom above the door were freed of all decorations and additions and were restored completely to their original appearance.

While the room inhabited by our Holy Father underwent many changes and renovations, the adjoining chapel, where he used to celebrate Mass, remained largely untouched and even during this restoration of 1967. (Acta Congregationis, January 1967)

The 2017 Restoration

In early 2017, fifty years after the last restoration of the Room, the Superior General, Fr. Joachim Rego, and his Council, realized that this sacred space of the Congregation and the Church once again needed to be restored. Fr. Joachim appointed a committee consisting of the General Consultor, Fr. Giuseppe Adobati, and several religious of the local community of Sts. John and Paul, to organize the work of the restoration together with the guidance a team of professional restorers. After studying the proposals of various experts, a final proposal was studied and approved. The restoration consisted of the following work:

Flooring/Pavement- the bricks that composed the flooring were carefully removed and cleaned. The foundation under the bricks was realigned and each brick put back into place. In the event that, with the passage of time, some bricks had disintegrated, replacement bricks of the same nature were used.

Walls- The walls were resurfaced and repainted using color schemes of the 18th century that were discovered beneath the various layers of paint.

Ceiling- The wooden ceiling was cleaned and restored.

Double-arched mullioned window- The windows in the main room and in the small chapel, where there had been water infiltration, were replaced, in keeping with the exterior of the windows that comprise the medieval façade of the basilica.

Lighting- New museum-style lighting was used in the throughout the complex.

Main door- the original wooden door of the room was cleaned and restored

Altar of St. Paul of the Cross- The original, simple wooden altar where St. Paul of the Cross celebrated Mass was uncovered from its protective exterior casing and tediously restored. The 18th century simple fresco on the wall above the altar, including the small, freestanding painting of Our Lady of Sorrows were cleaned and returned to their original location. A glass covering was placed over the altar, thus allowing for the possibility of viewing the original altar as well as for protection.

Chair of the Founder- During the final years of the life of the St. Paul of the Cross, apparently he found walking to be very difficult. Therefore, a special chair was designed to transport him to other locations in the monastery and to the Basilica. This chair was also restored and placed in a more visible place in the Room.

The Mission Crucifix – The Mission Crucifix that had been in the room since the death of the Founder was restored to its original beauty and simplicity.

The restoration of additional objects that are associated with this Room is scheduled for the upcoming months. With additional funding, a new smaller altar will be commissioned for the larger of the two rooms where Mass can be celebrated with larger groups of pilgrims.