

WORKSHOP FOR FORMATORS CPPS, JULY 5th – 17th, 2010

PRECIOUS BLOOD SPIRITUALITY AND FORMATION

Reflection Two:

“How to help our candidates grow in a spirituality of the Blood?”

or,

“How to help our candidates to embody and live our spirituality?”

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General Introduction

Formation lies at the heart of any religious institute. It is there that the charism and spirituality of an institute is nurtured and transmitted to the next generation. The foundations laid in the initial stages of formation will have a defining character for any future development.

In this light we read the text from the Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita consecrata*, written after the Synod on Consecrated Life in 1994.

“The Synod Fathers earnestly asked all Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life to draw up as soon as possible a *ratio institutionis*, that is, a formation program inspired by their particular charism, presenting clearly and in all its stages the course to be followed in order to **assimilate fully the spirituality of the respective Institute**. The *ratio* responds to a pressing need today. On the one hand, it shows how to pass on the Institute’s spirit so that it will be lived in its integrity by future generations, in different cultures and geographical regions; on the other hand, it explains to consecrated persons how to live that spirit in the different stages of life on the way to full maturity of faith in Christ.”

(*Vita Consecrata*, # 68)

The Call to Discipleship: “Come, follow me!”

Before entering into the more specific area of our Precious Blood Spirituality, it is important to remember something very basic: Importance of knowing Christ and the Word of God! **(Share the Experience of my ministry in formation in Guatemala)**

Before we can speak of a spirituality of the Blood of Christ, one must constantly confirm our “yes” to Jesus and to the message of the Gospel. We should not take for granted that our candidates know well the Word of God, or that they have more than a basic catechetical instruction. The situation in many areas of our Congregation is such that candidates coming into our formation program, have only a minimal grasp of Scripture and of Church teaching. Without a basic familiarity and understanding of the Word of God, and knowledge of fundamental aspects and beliefs of our faith, we cannot expect our candidates to grasp the depths and the challenges of living a spirituality of the Blood of Christ.

Thus we need to ensure that time is given in our formation programs to:

- Bible Study
- Faith Sharing
- Discernment/revision of life

Through these means we hope to help the candidate to have a personal experience of Christ and to learn to connect their faith to their daily life experiences.

It will be upon these foundations that we can begin to introduce our candidates to the rich treasure of a spirituality of the Blood of Christ.

Having said that, I also recognize that not all our candidates today, even in the same country or community, enter with the same experience and religious formation.

Growing in a Spirituality of the Blood of Christ

As an introduction to this theme, I would like to take a look at our Founder St. Gaspar to see how he came eventually to be called “the true and greatest apostle of the devotion to the Most Precious Blood in the world.”

Fr. Beniamino Conti, probably the community’s greatest expert on the life and the writings of St. Gaspar, wrote his dissertation thesis on “the spirituality of the Precious Blood in St. Gaspar.” I would like to highlight certain elements of his

work here, since they address the same basic theme that I have been asked to speak on today.

Gaspar did not begin his priesthood and apostolic ministry with a clear Precious Blood identity, as we would say today. It is something that he discovered. Don Beniamino, in his presentation, speaks about the different stages of Gaspar's life and how he experienced the spirituality during those stages.

Gaspar's Youth¹

Testimonies given during the canonical processes for Gaspar's beatification repeatedly affirm that from his childhood Gaspar loved Jesus and the mysteries of redemption dearly. He was quite devoted to the Eucharist, to the Passion, to the Madonna, and in a special way to St. Francis Xavier and St. Aloysius Gonzaga, but the witnesses never speak of true devotion to the Most Precious Blood.

- **The Mystery of Redemption & The Passion (Crucifix):** he frequently meditated on the Passion and was particularly moved by the shedding of the Blood in the Garden; he became friends of the "Passionists" and of St. Vincent Strambi, who would later collaborate with Gaspar in spreading the devotion to the Precious Blood.

And Gaspar was schooled "**at the foot of the Cross**". It was here that he arrived at the greatest expression of holiness: to give back one's life for life.

- **Restorative penance and apostolate.** The young Gaspar had an acute sense of sin and wished to do penance for sin and to participate in the redemptive act of Christ by associating himself with the Passion through his acts of sacrifice and penance. Thus he hoped to reign in his own sinful tendencies.

Gaspar was drawn to fighting evil and to spreading good as much as possible. When reading the story of his life one is impressed with all the apostolic activities he was engaged in from his youth on.

- **The Mystery of the Eucharist.** He frequented Mass and when of age, he served Mass often. He was very devout and would visit churches where the Blessed Sacrament was exposed for the Forty Hours Devotion.

¹¹ The following section on the development of the spirituality of the Precious Blood in the life of St. Gaspar is based upon the work of Don Beniamino Conti, CPPS, entitled **St. Gaspar del Bufalo, Apostle of the Blood of Christ, Volume I: Devotion to the Blood of Christ in the Life and Apostolate of St. Gaspar**, published in 1970 and reissued in 2002.

While these aspects that are highlighted above, could characterize the spiritual life of any Christian, they are the roots from which will develop abundantly the personality of the future Apostle of the Most Precious Blood.

December 1808

- **The Confraternity of the Most Precious Blood (San Nicola in Carcere)**

Gaspar's first explicit encounter with the devotion to the Precious Blood took place on December 8, 1808 when invited by Francesco Albertini to preach at the Basilica of San Nicola in Carcere. The occasion was the inauguration of the "Pious Association of the Most Precious Blood of Jesus Christ, of the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of the Holy Souls in Purgatory".

In this Basilica there was mounted and sealed in a silver box, a relic of the Precious Blood, a gift from Prince Giulio Savelli. This relic was preserved in the basilica since 1708. This relic was placed on the altar of the Crucifix. This crucifix, as tradition says, had spoken to St. Brigida.

In a desire to awaken the neighboring quarters from their religious apathy, Don Francesco Albertini regarded the devotion of the Precious Blood to be an apt means. Thus he invited his neighbor, Gaspar Del Bufalo, already a renowned preacher and zealous apostle to deliver the sermon for the occasion.

- **His sermon**

In his sermon Gaspar did not specifically speak of the Precious Blood until the very end where he prayed to the Most Precious Blood and to the Blessed Mother to implore the abundance and fullness of blessings upon the new Association.

Otherwise his discourse would be difficult to distinguish from devotion to Jesus crucified, to the Passion, or to the Eucharist. This 23 year-old Gaspar still had not developed a personal devotion to the Precious Blood.

- **Francesco Albertini**

Don Francesco Albertini, Canon of the Basilica of San Nicola in Carcere and Gaspar del Bufalo, Canon of nearby St. Mark's Basilica, at this time had but only fleeting encounters. The young Gaspar had his own spiritual director, Mons. Giovanni Marchetti, rector of the Church of the Gesu. It was only during the years of exile that the relationship between Albertini and Gaspar would take on a significant role.

Prison Experience (1810-1814)

A significant stage in the development of the spirituality of the Precious Blood in the life of St. Gaspar came as a result of his imprisonment during the Napoleonic invasion of the Papal States. Having refused to take the oath of allegiance to Napoleon, he was sent into exile. With him in exile was also the Canon of St. Nicola in Carcere, Francesco Albertini. And so the threads of the divine fabric began to come together. Gaspar would now be rubbing shoulders with the pioneer of the devotion to the Precious Blood. He submitted himself willingly to his influence. Gaspar was impressed with the zeal of Albertini in spreading the devotion to the Precious Blood wherever he went.

Francesco Albertini guided Gaspar spiritually during his exile and gently and patiently steeped Gaspar in the mystery of the Blood of Christ. His own suffering, isolation, and hardships endured while in prison also gave him a share in the Passion of Christ. Don Beniamino Conti writes in his book: *"In prison his soul was formed not only by study and prayer but also by his accepting this martyrdom out of love for Jesus Christ and the Church."* (p. 30) He also writes of the significant role that Albertini played in Gaspar's life: *"Albertini molded the soul of Gaspar for his great mission and their destinies appeared to be fused together into a single ideal and their souls burned with the same spirituality."* (p. 30) It was during their deportation together in Bologna in 1811 that Gaspar began to mention in his letters more explicitly the devotion to the Precious Blood. At the time, he was 25 years old. He then propagated the devotion through the Chaplet of the Precious Blood, composed by Albertini.

Apostolic Missionary (1814 onward)

Having been dissuaded by Pius VII from joining the Jesuits, Gaspar accepted the wish of the Holy Father to become an apostolic missionary in his own homeland. He and the group of preachers headed by Bonanni would later form part of the Archconfraternity and be considered the principle promoters of the devotion to the Precious Blood. In 1817, St. Gaspar was proclaimed by his confreres as the **First Promoter and Missionary of the Archconfraternity**. St. Gaspar made a vow to spread the devotion to the Precious Blood to the point of sacrifice. He lived this vow until his death in 1837.

What can we learn from Gaspar's Experience?

For our own ministry in formation and working with candidates, we can glean a few important points to remember from Gaspar's own experience.

1. Formation in the spirituality of the Precious Blood is a process.

Gaspar wasn't born with the spirituality. He grew into it, so to speak. (you don't feed a steak to a baby without teeth!; you don't initiate candidates in the spirituality with Bob Schreiter's book, "In Water and in Blood"!

Importance of laying the foundations upon which to build. Gaspar's spirituality of the Blood of Christ was built upon the foundations he already experienced as a young boy and adult: the Passion, Sin and Repentance, Redemption, the Eucharist. Our candidates often come with no spirituality of the Blood of Christ. Thus, we have to build from the foundations up.

My own experience reflects in many ways that of St. Gaspar with regard to how I have come to live a spirituality of the blood of Christ. When a young boy, I was pious and devote and also felt a certain attraction to the Passion of Christ and to the Crucifix. I frequented Mass and served as an altar boy.

In Guatemala, I developed a type of "syllabus" for the different stages of formation in the understanding of the spirituality, through articles, books, and experiences which would respect a growing into and a deepening of the spirituality as a process.

Let's pause here for a few moments for some sharing. Form in small groups to talk about your own experience. How did you discover the spirituality of the Precious Blood? How did the spirituality develop in you? Can you identify the stages in your own life?

Back in the big group, would anyone like to share briefly something you heard in your group?

2. The influence of mentors.

As stated before, Francesco Albertini played an important role in schooling the young priest, Gaspar, while in prison. Albertini played a very important role in Gaspar's life and his influence on Gaspar has been passed on to all of us.

My own experience: It wasn't till I met Fr. Winfried Wermter and traveled to Southern Chile with him on an overnight bus trip, that I began to discover the Precious Blood as a spirituality connected with life. This discovery excited me and set me on a journey which still goes on today. Over the next years, through reading his reflections the spirituality became alive for me. Perhaps this is also the experience of many of you.

Let's form once again in small groups and share with one another our own experiences. Who were my mentors in the spirituality? As a formator, am I ready to be a mentor for the candidates on their journey of growth into a spirituality of the Precious Blood?

Once again in the large group, we can share one or the other experience.

3. The importance of our life experiences as formative.

But since that first schooling at the foot of a person who mentored me, so to speak, I began to discover the power of the Blood of Christ in my everyday life experiences. Some experiences were of suffering, of persecution, of betrayal; others were joyful, full of life, experiences of reconciliation and healing. But once I moved from a devotion to the blood of Christ expressed mostly in old hymns and prayers which didn't speak to me very much, to a spirituality rooted in the following of Christ in everyday life, it became a passion in my life.

Once again we pause to share with one another. Can I identify in my life any particular experiences that helped to shape my Precious Blood Spirituality?

We share one or the other experience in the larger group.

Some basic threads of a spirituality of the Blood of Christ

As we accompany the individual, what are some of the basic strands of spirituality which that individual embodies or seeks to embody? How can we build upon those foundations? Where/how do they connect with the spirituality of the Blood of Christ?

COVENANT

The theme of the Covenant is a basic theme of our spirituality. It speaks to us of community, building relationships, and learning to grow in an appreciation of “the Other.”

We are an international, pluricultural congregation. In our evermore interconnected and intercommunicated world, it is necessary to learn to appreciate others and to see cultural diversity as an opportunity for enrichment, rather than suspicion.

How do we help the candidate to adjust to the “congregation's culture”? And how can we offer possibilities for the candidates to experience cultural diversity and to appreciate it?

In a spirituality of the covenant we are called to form community in our diversity, bonded together by love, “in the bond of charity.” This bond is renewed each day as we celebrate the Eucharist and share from a common Cup.

Always aware that formation is a process, we need to create opportunities for the group of candidates to evaluate how they are forming community among themselves, how they are being challenged to move from an “I oriented” to a “We oriented” world. For some, this may be their first real experience of community. Learning to respect the other, to work together, to pray together, to study together, is a process which has to be learned through experience. Moments of

group evaluation are important for helping the candidate see clearly how he is relating to others.

It is upon this foundation of learning to live in community, that one can understand the implications and challenges involved in living the spirituality of the Blood of covenant. To live this aspect of our spirituality is to live with an attitude and disposition of **hospitality**. **How do we welcome “others” into our lives?** The candidate needs to be challenged to see how he is being called to be stretched in order to accept the “other” who is different than he.

Opportunities to work in team with others, with lay women and men and with other women and men religious, is very important. And at some point an experience of living and working in a culture other than one’s culture of origin is very important if we are to be one day builders of community in our increasingly culturally diverse society. We need to continue to stress in formation, the importance of **learning another language**, since language is the key for entering into the culture of the other.

“From the moment of initial formation, community life must disclose the essential missionary dimension of consecration. Thus, during this period of initial formation, Institutes of Consecrated Life do well to provide practical experiences which are prudently followed by the one responsible for formation, enabling candidates to test, in the context of the local culture, their skills for the apostolate, their ability to adapt and their spirit of initiative.” (VC, # 67)

“On the other hand, it is important for consecrated persons gradually to develop a critical judgment, based on the Gospel, regarding the positive and negative values of their own culture and of the culture in which they will eventually work.” (VC, # 67)

(Share my experience in Guatemala: the formator and one of the priests...“in my culture, unless the person who offended me does not ask my forgiveness, I do not forgive!”)

To “live in covenant relationship” in the Blood of Christ is a marvelous opportunity to witness to God’s plan for all humanity and is a **constant call to conversion**. We are called to recognize our prejudices and sometimes masked racisms, a sense of cultural superiority and excessive nationalism, which can cause hurts and can build walls between us.

CROSS

One of the major symbols of our spirituality and one which is central to Christianity and in popular devotions, is the Cross. For those of us who are called to embrace a spirituality of the Blood of Christ, the cross plays a central role, for it is *“through the blood of the Cross that we have been reconciled.”*

Gaspar often called his missionaries to sit at the foot of the Cross to discover its wisdom. We are invited time and again to “read the book of the Cross.” When we do so, many significant themes for our daily life and ministry come to the foreground:

- A love poured out generously for all

Does the candidate show a spirit of service and generosity, or is he satisfied with doing the least? How can we help him to grow in a spirit of generous love?

- The open arms and pierced side as a place of hospitality and inclusivity

How does the candidate relate to the “others” in his life (to those who think differently, who are of a foreign country, who come from a different social status, etc)?

- The blood which reconciled all things

How does the candidate deal with conflicts at the individual level and in community? Help the candidate recognize his own wounds and need for healing and reconciliation.

- Hope in suffering

How does the candidate cope with suffering, pain, failures, etc. in his own personal life and in community? Does the suffering drag him down? Is he tempted to throw in the towel at the first disappointment or failure?

CUP

Appreciation of the Eucharist/Eucharistic Adoration. Help the candidate connect the Eucharist to his everyday life and commitments. To grow from a personal devotion to a commitment to be body broken and blood shed for others. To move from the Lord of the Tabernacle to the Tabernacle of the Lord. **To love generously: break the bread of life and pour out one’s life in generous love**

THE CRY AND THE CALL OF THE BLOOD

As important as a “syllabus” of Precious Blood readings be for the formative process, I would venture to say that the most important aspect is that of helping the candidate learn to **make connections** between the spirituality and his life experiences at all levels.

We need, frankly, to “put on our Precious Blood lenses” through which we read the Scriptures, to discern the cry of the Blood in our daily life and ministry, discover how to be faithful to God’s call. To see all through the lens of the Precious Blood.

This is an ongoing learning experience. At first it may seem a bit artificial, but little-by-little it becomes part and parcel of who we are, how we think, how we make judgments, our priorities in ministry, our personal choices, etc.

I learned this as I witnessed how my mentor in early years did it. How he made connections. How Precious Blood spirituality was alive in him, at a time when I had not a clue as to what it meant, let alone how it would influence my life!

I learned it from a friend who one day questioned me and kept pushing me deeper and deeper as to “why” I had made an option in St. Gaspar’s school in Santiago for the “poor” students, for those with discipline problems, etc. I gave him the book answers, the head answers...but he kept insisting, “but where is **the passion** coming from?” Then it clicked: it was coming from my own experience. I had never made that connection before.

How can we help the candidates make those connections in their own lives?

- **Methods of Discernment:** Cry and Call of the Blood in **my life/experiences** (reading the newspaper and looking through the eyes of God!
- Sharing of experiences in daily life and in ministry.
- Community reflections/revision of life: **eyes to see and ears to hear.**
- Daily Exam at the end of the day: *Where/in whom did I hear the cry of the blood today? How did I respond to that call?*
- Through personal dialogue and group discussions, to help the candidate discover his personal gifts/talents (that spark of God within) and to see how they can be developed/used within a spirituality of the Blood.
- Others?

What other ways or methods have you found that help in this process? Let's share some of those experiences.