

The Covenant: United in the Blood

*“God is at work in your heart,
which he activates just like a furnace of charity.
And what really is true zeal if not the ardor of charity?”*

St. Gaspar
Letter, 3326

In Tanzania for the meeting of Precious Blood major superiors in September 2014, we visited some of the towns, villages, and ministries served by our missionaries. When we arrived in Itigi, Fr. Seraphim, the director of the hospital, a warm and hospitable person whose smile can light up the dreariest of days, introduced us to the staff and the doctor in charge of medical care at the hospital who gave us the tour. This hospital saves so many lives. More than 80,000 people a year are served by the hospital and the children especially have a better chance to survive and have a healthy life because of the prenatal care provided by the hospital.

After the tour, we walked about a half mile or so to the church. As we were walking, Fr. Seraphim said there was funeral about to begin at the church. He was the main celebrant. One of the nurses at the hospital died suddenly the day before while caring for a patient. Because of the heat and lack of embalming, the funeral takes place as soon as possible.

The Church was packed when we arrived. We walked past the casket at the front door of the church—a simple wood box with a picture of the nurse, smiling, setting on top of the coffin with a few flowers and ribbons. Each of us paused briefly at the coffin to pray and bless the body. The large group of family and friends gathered at the entrance of the church were chanting a lamentation.

The mysteries of life and death and the power of relationship, of covenant in the blood of Christ, were so clear on that hot September afternoon in Itigi. Just before walking to church, we had visited the maternity unit where newborn babies, so tiny, so fragile, so beautiful, slept in their mother's arms. And within a few hundred yards, we traveled a lifetime to the funeral of a woman who the day before may have assisted at the birth of one of these babies and was now on her way to a new birth, a new creation, as her family, friends, and parish mourned her sudden loss.

The blood of Christ beckons us to believe in the power of these relationships that bind us together in a covenant of love. A covenant forged in the forgiving love of Christ on the cross that draws all peoples near to the very heart of God.

Redemptive Memory

The prophet Jeremiah named this relationship when he wrote, “The days are coming, say your God, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah (31, 31).” Jeremiah traces the origin of the new covenant God desires to make with us by jogging our memory about the first covenant when God “took our ancestors by the hand to lead them forth from the land of Egypt.”

The “hand of God” is a biblical image that is interpreted in various ways. Jeremiah paints a picture of the hand of God that like a mother grasping the hand of her child to protect her while crossing a busy street. With the help of God’s hand, our ancestors in faith were led out of slavery and across a dry and barren desert. Without the helping hand of God, they would have died of oppression—either from the oppression of those who enslaved them or the oppressive heat of the desert when they grumbled and stumbled on the way to their freedom.

In this unique and unconditional relationship captured in the language of “new covenant,” the prophet portrays a God who is powerful yet personal, infinite yet intimate. The prophet describes the nature of God as so personal that the covenant is no longer written on tablets of stone but written upon our hearts by the tender, compassionate hand of God. Jeremiah lovingly describes this relationship God desires to have with us: “I will be their God, and they shall be my people (31, 33b).”

What this means is that God knows us by heart. We know from experience what happens when we know something “by heart.” We can learn a song or a prayer “by heart.” But sometimes this only means we learn by it by rote—memorize the dos and don’ts, the doctrine, dogma, and dates, the history and tradition but never integrate into our lives. We can memorize for a test but once the test is taken we forget what we learned because we don’t assimilate it or incorporate it into our life experience.

But when we talk of knowing something or someone by heart, we are not talking about *rote* memory but *relational* memory. When we know someone by heart, we know the other on a deeper level because have spent time with the other tracing each one’s story. We have created a safe harbor for each other to take risks in speaking from the depths of one’s heart. We are willing to sacrifice our own needs and wants for the sake of the other. We don’t hide behind our fears or insecurities, are not afraid to name and claim our weakness, and don’t pretend or put on masks.

Knowing another by heart and being known by heart by another is the greatest of gifts because our lives are awakened and our senses are stirred. When we know and are known by heart, we begin to understand the nature of the new covenant. A covenant God no longer writes on stone but on our hearts. And that is why, the prophet writes, “No longer will they have a need to teach their friends and relatives how to know God,” because once God writes the covenant of love upon our hearts, we shall know God.

When the real tests in life come—the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, the death of a dream, the disintegration of a relationship—knowing the rules by rote memory won’t help us. But trusting we are known by heart, by God, will help us get through the crisis. We cannot separate ourselves from this relationship because as we pray in the Eucharistic Prayer of Reconciliation, God has signed, sealed and delivered this covenant in the flesh and in blood in the person of Jesus “by a bond that can never be broken.”

This new covenant relationship is more than an ideal; it is real. We see it in the sacrifice parents make for their children, spouses make for each other, and adult sons and daughters make for aging and infirmed parents. Living in this covenantal relationship is never easy but as people of the blood known by heart, the very reason Jesus came into the world is to show us once again how God’s love is etched upon our hearts. Once again this love is expressed in the image of the hand of God—the hands of Jesus stretched out upon the cross, nailed to a tree, and lifted up to draw all peoples to the very heart of God.

Mediator of a New Covenant

In the Letter to the Hebrews we read how Jesus is “the mediator of a new covenant” whose blood “speaks more eloquently than that of Abel (12, 21-24).” This is the essence of Precious Blood spirituality. In his person and through his blood, Jesus mediates this new covenant that reflects our relationship with God. Jesus is the one who reconciles humanity to God. In his blood, Jesus infuses the world with energy and life.

This Precious Blood transfusion reflects a new quality of relationship that God has with us, building upon the first covenant God made with our ancestors in faith when the prophet captured the relationship in the familiar phrase, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” Now, in Jesus, this first covenant damaged by sin and broken by betrayal is now restored.

This restoration makes our relationship with God new. The “sprinkled blood” is now poured out, rushing and gushing from the side of Jesus to create a river of mercy, a stream of redemption. And when one looks into this pool of blood, one sees the reflection of the divine in human form.

This is not a stagnant pool but a flowing stream that flows from the cross and travels to the far corners of the earth. This blood “speaks more eloquently than that of Abel” which also cried out from the ground to name the violence and claim the injustice because this blood of Christ cries out for reconciliation, forgiveness, mercy, and peace. The eloquence of the blood is found in its language of love, its cadence of compassion, its rhythm of redemption.

This blood speaks more eloquently because it is poetic and passionate and speaks for an entire human race. Abel’s blood cried murder and violence that was done to him by his brother. Every murder victim’s blood, every victim of violence and terror, shouts to the heavens and screams for vengeance. We have seen it too often in recent years with so many terrorist attacks. We hear the cries for revenge. This is the world in which we live and the shouts for vengeance drown out the calls for peace and reconciliation.

Place your ear close to the ground and listen for the blood sighing, crying for peace, for justice, for reconciliation. There is so much bloodshed today. The world is awash in blood. The world wrestles with how to stem the tsunami of terror. The response, “You kill our hostage, we kill yours,” spins the cycle of violence and accelerates the carnage. Profound statements that denounce the violence make little difference. There is a thirst for revenge.

But we have seen where this action leads. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States waged war with Afghanistan and later with Iraq. Since then, we have been soul deep in a quagmire of blood and tears that have lasted for years.

The eloquence of the blood of Christ is getting silenced by the loud cries for vengeance and retribution. The poetic passion of the blood is erased by the sword of violence. Once again the blood of Christ must flood the world in a show of force. We know that peace begins within each of our hearts. So we pray, “Speak, blood of Christ, help us to hear the echoes of your eloquence in our hearts.”

A Cloud of Witnesses

Once we become aware of the power of the blood of Christ in our lives; once we sense and see how it can be the driving force in our desire to bring all people together around a common table, there is no end in sight. We long to belong and we long for all to belong. We cannot forget for whenever we gather at the table of Eucharist, we are to “do this in remembrance of me.” When Jesus speaks these words on the night before he died, he was speaking from the Jewish understanding of covenant—the biblical understanding that to

remember the covenant meant not only call it to mind or kindle the memory but to experience it again. To do this in remembrance of Jesus means we are to make real, to make present, what Jesus did on the night before he died. This is what Paul is alluding to when he addresses the community at Corinth that is rife with division and split into factions. They are not being true, they are not being authentic, and they are not living with integrity that comes from their Eucharistic identity.

This memory and the nature of this covenantal relationship transcend the bounds of earth and connect us with the communion of saints. One of the first things you see when you enter a home in Vietnam is the altar honoring the family's ancestors. These altars are often elaborate and ornate—decorated with vigil lights and candles, flowers and incense, and lots of pictures. This communion of saints, what the Letter to the Hebrews calls, the “cloud of witnesses,” offers a sacred connection and occupies a holy place in every home.

The cloud of witnesses the letter to the Hebrews refers to a cloud formation caused by people on fire with love, on fire with a passion for peace and prayer, truth and justice. These are the ones the great mystic, Catherine of Siena, must have been referring to when she advised, “Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.” As people of the precious blood who seek to live the covenant, this is our challenge: to set the world on fire by being faithful to the call of God that we have heard in our hearts.

The clouds that forms from these witnesses who are on fire with God's love, compassion, and peace, hovers over the landscape and signals to all that where there is smoke, there is fire. Not the fire that destroys but the fire that dares to draw others near to the love of God.

In cloud terminology, there is something called a “halo” effect which appears as a thin circle surrounding the sun or moon formed by ice crystals in cirrus clouds. Since we often associate haloes with saints, the challenge for each of us is to remember we are raised to a high altitude only when we take the lowest place. When the fire of God's mercy and compassion has removed the weight of our sin, the cloud formation reflects God's redeeming grace. The cloud of witnesses captures a belief in the expansive love of God for all peoples.

The blood beckons us to believe in the power of personal relationships. The covenant in the blood is based on relationships with God and with one another. When we make a covenant and seal it with the blood of Christ, we are saying we believe in God and in the Godlikeness, the goodness, of one another. True reconciliation in the blood of Christ is found in this simple and enduring proposition: we are all children of God, blood brothers and sisters who are in relationship with one another and with our loving and faithful God.

Precious Blood spirituality is about living this covenant in the blood of Christ and our fidelity to the covenant reflects the quality of relationship the covenant symbolizes—the depth and width and height of God's gracious love for the people.