

## **The Cross: Wounded Blessings**

*“Let us joyfully carry the Cross,  
let us live by the Cross,  
let us die with the Cross.”*

St. Gaspar  
Letter, 2959

Christians are born and baptized under the sign of the cross. When we pray, the first thing most of us do is etch this sign upon our bodies: “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” But when this sign is tattooed upon our bodies and souls through experiences of trauma, tragedy, and terror that threaten to crush our bodies and break our spirits, we know how it can be a turning point in our lives. When we are crushed by the cross, we can either go deeper into the mystery of Christ’s suffering and death or we can turn and walk another way.

There is a ritual found among some Native American peoples that suggests that when a person is grieving or suffers a tragedy or traumatic loss, the person is to go out into the forest with an axe. The person chooses a tree to represent the loss and strikes the bark of the tree with several sharp blows. The idea is that the wounds inflicted upon the heart of the person by loss are inflicted upon the tree not only symbolically but in reality. Like the individual, the tree is wounded. But the tree is not cut down or destroyed. From that time on, then, the person who has suffered the loss is encouraged to go to the tree on a regular basis to pray and be present to the gradual healing from the wounds the tree has suffered. According to Margaret Silf, the belief is “the tree and the mourner become one both in their pain and in their healing until eventually what they share has become a deep and sacred scar.”

For Christians, that tree is the cross of Christ. Pope Francis has placed the cross front and center of our lives. “When we journey without the cross,” he said, “when we build without the cross, when we profess Christ without the cross, we are not disciples of the Lord, we are worldly.” He believes the cross has to be at the center of our lives as missionary disciples or else we will sell out to the care of the world. “My wish,” he said, “is that all of us will have the courage to walk in the presence of the Lord, with the Lord’s cross to build the church on the Lord’s blood which was poured out on the cross; and to profess the one glory: Christ crucified.”

Precious Blood people find their footing at the foot of the cross. This is where we stand. Gaspar captured his holy place, this primary stance, as the space “where the repentant sinner finds comfort, where the troubled soul finds courage, where the soul already sanctified finds the tenderness of love (834).” He advised his community to “listen to God’s voice at the foot of the crucifix (588).”

At the foot of the cross there are no answers to the questions that crowd our minds and hearts. At the foot of the cross, we acknowledge that we don’t know the whole story and never will know the whole story. At the foot of the cross, we put our doubts and our fears and yes, even

our tears. And we do so because, as St. Paul reminds us in Ephesians, Jesus desires to draw all of us near.

We gather at the foot of the cross because we believe Christ is our peace “who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity.” Therefore we are “no longer strangers and sojourners,” but are now “fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God.”

When we gather at the foot of the cross, some of us are standing as Jesus’ mother Mary and his best friend John were when he provided a future for them after this death. When we gather at the foot of the cross, some of us are on our knees, as paintings often show Mary Magdalene was as she washed Jesus’ bloody feet with her tears. When we gather at the foot of the cross, some of us are sitting, worn out, exhausted, as the famous sculpture, the Pieta, depicts Mary as she holds the lifeless body of her son after he is taken down from the cross.

What all of these stances have in common is that they find their common ground around the cross. This is the holy ground on which we pray. Here we find the sacred relationship, the holy connection we share as people of faith. And as people named for the blood of Christ, this relationship is not only with those who are close to us, those we love and who love us, those who agree with us or hold the same beliefs as we do. The relationship we share in the blood of Christ is that the cross draws all people near, those “who were far off,” those we find difficult to love, those who have hurt us or betrayed us or broken our hearts.

The faith we profess in the cross of Jesus is our belief that out of these crosses and losses of life we build the bridges that bring all peoples together. Out of the crosses and losses of life, we construct this household of God where there is room for all—the abused and the accused, the innocent and the guilty, the victim and the aggressor.

Like that tree, we are all scarred, we are all wounded. Remember when Jesus appeared to his disciples in that upper room after his resurrection, he still bore the marks, the scars, of crucifixion. So when we gather at the foot of the cross, we proclaim our belief in the presence of a God who suffers with us.

### **Outside the Camp: Called to Heal Wounds**

When we are in touch with our wounds, these deep and sacred scars, we become vulnerable. Professor Robert Goizueta maintains, “The act of solidarity with the wounded other is an acknowledgment of our common woundedness, our common powerlessness.” When we encounter the cross, engage the cross, even embrace the cross, we are reminded that we are not in charge; we are not in control. This is where humility comes in. Maybe that is the most important lesson we can learn from this time at the foot of the cross: humility. One cannot be arrogant or proud in the shadow of the cross. A sense of invulnerability or invincibility is an obstacle to a spirit of humility and hospitality that leads to reconciliation and true peace. Through our wounds, we are called to embrace the grace of being a humble people who live with our doubts and our fears, who don’t have all the answers, but who are always willing to live, seek, and speak the truth.

When we listen to the blood, touch our wounds, and trace our scars, we will place ourselves “outside the camp.” This is the place where Precious Blood people make themselves at home: outside the mainstream and on the margins where a stream of mercy flows. When we take up residence outside the camp, we stand in solidarity with those who are shunned by majority, ostracized by the institution, and pushed away from the table. This is the movement of

missionary disciples who identify as Precious Blood people: not front and center but on the fringe.

This was the focus of Pope Francis' homily on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday in 2015 when he celebrated Eucharist with the new cardinals. The gospel for that day was the story from Mark's gospel about the leper who came to Jesus for healing. His disease had placed him outside the community; his leprosy had marked him as an outcast. The Holy Father reflected on the compassion of Jesus in reaching out to the leper, curing his disease, and restoring him to a place in community. "That compassion, meaning to suffer with, made him draw near to every person in pain," Pope Francis told the cardinals and the world. "Jesus does not hold back; instead he gets involved in peoples' pain and their need."

The Holy Father underscored the point that when Jesus healed the leper, he placed himself outside the camp. He "took upon himself the marginalization enjoined by the Law of Moses" recalling the words from the book of Leviticus regarding those with leprosy, "He shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp (1, 46)." By doing this, Francis said, "Jesus reinstates the marginalized!" He told the new cardinals, "We will not find the Lord unless we truly accept the marginalized! The gospel of the marginalized is where our credibility is at stake, is discovered, and is revealed."

Here we see the inclusive nature of the reign of God. Jesus could have waved a blessing over the leper's head to heal him but instead "he touched him." By saying, "I do will it, be healed," and touching the leper, Jesus reaches out to the untouchable and transcends the boundary of fear.

By stretching out his hand, he breaks down the barrier that kept this man outside the camp and isolated from his family, friends, and faith community. "The leprosy left him immediately," Mark writes, "and he was made clean." By healing the man with leprosy, Jesus was not only curing him of leprosy but loneliness—he was restoring him to his family, his friends, and his faith community.

Then, as Pope Francis mentioned, the story takes an intriguing twist of fate and faith. To this point, it is a miracle story. The miracle is not only the healing of the leper but the miracle of community, of love, that no one has to live outside the camp or dwell apart. But this encounter with the leper foreshadows Jesus' fate. He stretches out his hand to the leper as he will stretch out his hands upon a cross to draw all peoples near to the heart of God. As the leper was banished "outside the camp," so Jesus will be crucified outside the holy city of Jerusalem. He would become the leper, marked with the stigma of the shamed and the blamed, the guilty and the damned. As the leper did before his healing, so Jesus will carry the stigma on his body after his resurrection. The wounds where the nails punctured his hands and feet and the spear slashed his side will leave scars on the body of Christ that reflects how Jesus identifies completely with those banished outside our camp today.

### **Signpost Stained with Blood**

The cross is the signpost of our lives stained with the blood of Christ. According to Paul's letter to the Ephesians, at the crossroads of life, Jesus draws all people together. We were once "strangers to the covenant and its promise," Paul writes, "without hope and without God in the world." We had taken the wrong path, made a wrong turn, were walking aimlessly, with no sense of direction. "But now in Christ Jesus," Paul writes, you who once were far off have been brought near through the blood of Christ."

It is the cross that points us in the direction of peace, of community, of justice, of truth. Paul doesn't mince words here. He says quite emphatically that Christ "is our peace, who made the two of us one by breaking down the barrier of hostility that kept us apart." Because we are stained with the blood of Christ, hostility is turned into hospitality. Those who have been excluded, who have been far off are now brought near. We welcome them home to God's heart as we point them in the direction of God's love.

Finally, St. Paul says Christ's blood makes us new people. Through his blood, Christ "creates in himself one new person from us who had been two, and to make peace reconciling both of us to God in one body through his cross." What is created in the blood of Jesus is not a variation of the old but something entirely new. The blood of Christ points us in a new direction that has never been tried but is certainly true. The old so-called "tried and true" ways that divided people into separate camps no longer exists in the blood of Christ because now all "who were far off and those who were near" have "access in the one Spirit to God."

This is where we stand as precious blood people—at the crossroads between a culture of death bent on its own self-destruction and a community of life and the construction of God's reign where all shall find life. As precious blood people who stand at the crossroads, we point in the direction where all of us "are fellow citizens of the saints and members of the household of God."

We are a people drawn near through the blood of Christ who keeps our eyes focused on the presence of the Crucified Christ among us even as we make room for one another at the foot of the cross and make this a place of healing and hope.