

## The Cup: Chalice of the Heart

*“This is the clear, distinguishing mark  
of the true follower of Jesus:  
to suffer anything out of love for him  
and to drink a small drop from that bitter chalice  
which he drank even to the very last drop for us.”*

St. Gaspar  
Letter, 17

What do we see when we look into the chalice? Do we see our own pain and sorrow mingled with God’s compassion to become the blood of Christ poured out as a ransom for all? Do we see the guilt and grace that has shaped our lives? Do we see the losses that have left us parched and the love that has us thirsting for more?

What do we see when we look into the chalice? Do we see those in our lives who have hurt us or harmed us in some way? Do we see those who have betrayed us and broken our hearts?

What do we see when we look into the chalice of our hearts? Do we see tender mercies and gentle memories? Do we see mistakes and missed opportunities floating to the top or sinking to the bottom of the cup? If we do, then drink them up and swallow the flavor of God’s forgiving love.

Nathan Mitchell reminds that when the priest at Eucharist echoes the prayer of Jesus and pronounces the words of consecration, “This is the chalice...”, he is not referring to the physicality of the cup—whether it is made of glass or ceramic or precious metal, “but an action, an event—and that *event* is nothing less than the covenant in Christ’s blood, a new beginning for human history, a new set of relationships between God, the world, and its people.”

Now, that’s a pretty tall order and it should give us pause before we drink from the cup. So I can understand if some don’t want to drink from the cup—not because of the germs but because of the grace and courage it takes to drink something that has the power to change our lives and even the face of the earth. “There is fire in the cup that burns until it ignites the fire in our belly,” Mitchell writes. “If blood could talk as it blazes, it would tell us to tremble in awe and gratitude.”

But Mitchell adds that it would also stir more than a little indigestion. “It would pronounce judgment on our sin,” he writes. “It would demand to know why we’ve kept the hungry child hungry, the table bare, the furnace cold, the beggar’s bowl empty, the old woman’s meds priced well beyond her reach. But blood would also wake the dead, warm the shelterless; it would call us home, call us by name.”

Called by the name of the blood, what do we see when we look into the chalice? What do we hear? With our senses awakened to the contents of this chalice, the most important question is the one Jesus asked, “Can we drink this cup?”

## **Blood Transfusion**

As a young minister, Clarence Jordan, best known for *The Cotton Patch Gospel*, was traveling through the Deep South in the 1930s advocating for racial equality. At one of his seminary lectures, a student asked Jordan, “Do you believe in the blood of Christ?”

“Yes,” Jordan replied, “provided it flows through your veins.”

The precious blood of Christ flows through our veins and provides the motivation for all that we do, all that we are. Once we recognize that the precious blood of Jesus flows in the bodies and souls of all human beings, we keep the memory of Jesus alive. The memory that was etched in the hearts, minds, and souls of his friends who gathered with him that night before he died when they heard him say for the first time, “Do this in memory of me.”

When Jesus, the high priest, entered that upstairs, spacious room that would become the sanctuary where a new creation would be conceived with his own blood, in the company of his friends, in the company of one who would deny him and one who would betray him, Jesus would initiate his own Passover, with his own blood: “This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, to be poured out on behalf of many.”

When we gather at the table of Eucharist, we celebrate our belonging to one another. “Take it, this is my body”—a body broken and bruised but beautiful to behold and to hold. A body wounded and scarred but whose heart is still beating and breathing with life. A body betrayed but still believing in the best that is in each one who gathers around this table.

“Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it.” The contents of this cup hold the truth of our being and the meaning of our belonging. This is the cup of the new covenant. This is the wine of compassion. This cup holds the forgiveness of our sins. “This is the blood of the covenant which will be shed for many.”

Not for a few. Not for several. Not just for those who believe as we do. Not just for those who follow all the rules. But for the many—which includes you and me, them and us, enemies and friends, foes and kin. The many includes all of the above and all down below, all who have reservations and all who are left out. The many are those who stand in line and those too sick and tired or depressed or lonely to get out of bed. We are the many because once you know the blood of Christ flows through your veins it influences who we are and everything we do.

Several years ago, after an especially bloody terrorist attack in Tel Aviv, three hundred college students waited patiently for six hours on a Friday in the library building at the Max Elias College in the Palestinian town of Ibillin to donate blood. On the surface, this is powerful witness that these students would be willing to share the gift of life with others. But scratch beneath the surface, and this donation of blood was a profound and powerful statement against the evil of war and terrorism. These 300 students were Palestinians who were donating their blood for use in Jewish hospitals for victims of the terrorist attack. Fr. Elias Chacour, a Melkite priest, organized the effort of the students. “We wanted to do something,” he said, “to sweep away some tears from the eyes of broken hearts...with our blood we decided to deny terror.”

As we drink from the cup, we find the courage to live in such a way that the world so badly in need of a transfusion of tender mercy and compassion, of peace and reconciliation, will be given new life through our witness. As those Palestinian students did for their Jewish brothers and sisters following the terrorist attack in Tel Aviv, so drinking from the cup commits us to do the same for one another, to be willing to pour out of lives in loving service. With our blood, we shall resist evil and reveal God’s redeeming love. With our blood, we will live lives worthy of our calling, who will live in relationship, deepen our commitment, and continue our struggle to give voice to peace we have found in the blood of Christ.

As Moses sprinkled the people with the blood of the covenant and splashed the altar with the same blood to seal the deal of a lifetime and more, so this cup holds the new covenant of love that makes us one. When we drink from this cup, the blood of Christ enters our bodies and flows through our veins. The blood of Christ pulsing through our bodies and the body of Christ marks us and makes us who we are, and shapes us into a new covenant community.

### **Life Force: Drinking the Cup**

In the foreword to the tenth anniversary edition of Henri Nouwen's classic, Can You Drink the Cup?, Ron Hansen notes, "The Jews recognized blood as a life force, created injunctions against consuming it, shed it as a sin offering, feared being defiled by it, and recalled it as a sign of the covenant with God in their annual celebration of deliverance at Passover."

Because the power this image of blood held for Jewish believers, they would have been repulsed by the invitation of Jesus, "Take this all of you and drink it: this is my blood, the blood of the covenant for the forgiveness of sin." Hansen adds, "Wine was called the 'blood of grapes (Genesis 49, 11)' and became a sign of friendship and accord, a gift of rejuvenation that was festive, luxurious, and a harbinger of the heavenly banquet, yet if overindulged in could lead to drunkenness and sin."

The genius of Jesus was to unite these two symbols of blood and wine on the night before he died as he celebrated the annual ritual of Passover with his friends. He was about to pass over himself and he invests the wine of friendship with new meaning. He holds on to the truth about deliverance and freedom and liberation our ancestors in faith believed when the blood of animals was splashed on their doors to save them from their oppressors. But now Jesus identifies his own blood as the means of deliverance. "In sharing the wine," Hansen writes, "those loyal to Christ were joining him in an offering of their own blood for the sake of others.... The blessing cup of wine became Christ's blood, a source of life and salvation for those who shared it."

Nouwen drew upon the image of Jesus at the Last Supper to meditate on the three-fold action of the cup: holding, lifting, and drinking. At every Eucharist we are in this "holding pattern" when we look into the cup and see the reflection of our very self—our hope and our hurt, our longing and love, our losses and crosses, our dreams and disappointments, our guilt and our grace, our sin and our shame, our beauty and our blame, our blessings and sufferings.

Capturing Nouwen's image of lifting the cup as "an invitation to affirm and celebrate life together," Hansen notes how it reflects "joining in community and sharing our cravings, our fantasies, our shame, our vulnerability and giving others permission to do likewise in a spirit of blessing, of giving thanks."

Then, when we drink the cup of life we are "fully appropriating and internalizing our own unique existence, with all its sorrows and joys." Hansen calls this the "challenge to forthrightly acknowledge who we are, to forsake the entrapments of our addictions, compulsions, and sins, and to be fully trusting in God as Jesus was when he, in a spirit of unconditional love, accepted his ministry with all its consequences."

### **Fire in the Cup**

What is important here is not only the drinking from the cup but also the voice of the blood, or as Father Barry Fischer has written, "the cry of the blood" that affirms the real presence of Christ as the One who brings forgiveness for our sins through his blood.

Nathan Mitchell believes many find it difficult to drink from the cup today because we are uncomfortable with bloodshed. But then, "coming to grips with bloodshed...is precisely the

point.” Because “without the cup, the Eucharist might easily sink to the level of an elegant dinner,” Mitchell writes, “where—surrounded by friends, fragrance, lights, and music—we sup serenely while the rest of the world goes mad. Good etiquette, alas, can make us forget our origins—and the origins of what we eat and drink.”

Drinking from the cup will not let us forget, according to Mitchell. “It will not let us close our ears to the cry of dereliction that shattered the soft spring day when a troublesome ‘Galilean prophet with an attitude’—co-crucified with criminals, suffocating, maddened by thirst—screamed in anguish to a God who made no reply. *The cup will not let us forget*. It will not let us sanitize the fact that Jesus died in ‘bad company’; nor will it silence the loud voice of the blood.”

Is this why we find it difficult to drink from the cup? Is this why some pass by when the cup is offered?

This is not easy. Jesus was a victim of torture. He was beaten and abused, stripped, scourged, nailed to a cross, and finally thrust through with a spear. “Blood and water draining from a cadaver,” Mitchell writes. “And all these were sacred signs that God is busy ‘reconciling the world to himself’? No wonder Christians in the West stayed away from the cup for so many centuries!”

When we drink from the cup, our bellies become on fire with justice. This blood sears our souls and seals our commitment to be reconcilers in a world so wounded with the bloodshed of violence and war and abuse. “Drinking from the cup,” Mitchell says, “we pledge ourselves to justice and solidarity with the losers, the powerless—all the have-nots who have been shut up, shut out, and shut down. The loud voice of Jesus’ blood will not let us forget that he died (as we must) for and among the weak and vulnerable, the insignificant ‘trash’ imperialist cultures love to hate.”

As our Father Bob Schreiter writes, “The cup of the blood of Jesus makes us participants both in the life of God and in the struggle against the suffering of the world.”

When we are in touch with the contents of the chalice of our hearts, we will be that person who reaches out in love to the outcast, the stranger, the brokenhearted and betrayed, the poor, the lonely and lost, the sick and the suffering, the grieving and the guilty, the forsaken and forgotten. We will be the person that the world will recognize as the new wine of compassion that is still being served on the altar of our world.