

TOWARDS A PRECIOUS BLOOD SPIRITUALITY OF MISSION

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Introductory Remarks

In light of the reflections of Steve Bevans in his paper entitled “Towards a Mission Spirituality,” I would like to preface my paper by stating that I share his understanding of “spirituality.” It is “like a reservoir from which a person or a community can draw to motivate action, to keep on track, to bolster commitment, to avoid discouragement when times get rough.” To speak of spirituality is not to speak about a part of life but rather about the whole of one’s life.

I found Steve’s paper to be very enlightening and it helped me enormously to understand in a more systematic way what has been going on in my own life over the past thirty years. It helped to categorize and to put names to my own spiritual journey as a Missionary of the Precious Blood. What I share here does not pretend to be more than that: namely, how I have come to understand mission in light of a Precious Blood Spirituality. Thus the importance of the word “towards” in the title of my presentation. I do not pretend that mine is THE Precious Blood Spirituality of Mission, but merely one person’s discovery based on my life experience. However, I do believe that you will discover elements in this particular expression which might help you to put into words your own spirituality of mission in light of our charism.

The Journey begins

For me it all began in 1979 when I was named Rector of St. Gaspar’s School in Santiago, Chile. The Vicariate of Education of the Archdiocese that year asked all Catholic schools to develop their educational project in light of their specific charism, that is, as Jesuits, Divine Word, Sacred Heart, Holy Cross, or Precious Blood. As I struggled with this challenge along with the school community, I met for the first time one of our Missionaries then serving on the General Council in Rome, Fr. Winfried Wermter. I accompanied him on a long bus trip to our missions in southern Chile. Our conversation which reached long into the night hours would be a decisive turning point in my own life and in my quest for a spirituality of the blood of Christ. For the first time since joining the Congregation I actually heard someone speak of St. Gaspar as though he were alive among us and of the blood of Christ as it connected with everyday life! I was fascinated and my curiosity was peaked. My own quest began that night. Even though in later years our individual quests would lead us down different paths and understandings of mission, what always remained in me was the conviction that “making connections” between

the spirituality and our mission in everyday life was of utmost importance if we are to have a CPPS identity and if we wish to share our charism with the Church and society.

Discovering the Scriptural Underpinnings

A few years later our Precious Blood Family in Chile would cross another threshold in our quest. Fr. Robert Schreiter was invited to give a series of reflections at an intercongregational workshop on Precious Blood Spirituality. It was for that workshop in the early 1980's that Fr. Bob gave the presentations which would later form the core of his timely book, *In Water and In Blood*. Bob masterfully sketched for us the Scriptural underpinnings of a spirituality of the blood of Christ. Each chapter began with one of the pertinent scripture passages which he would then break open for us by relating them to the cultural, social, and political situation in which we were immersed in Latin America at the time. He proposed as well the symbols of *covenant, cross, and cup*, which have come to be for the CPPS central images through which we express our spirituality and live our mission.

In later years, Fr. Bob would continue to enrich our reflections by deepening our understanding of *reconciliation* and its central place in the mission of the Church in our globalized world.

Making Connections: The Cry and the Call of the Blood

A further step in my journey came when I read the Encyclical Letter of John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, published in 1995. I was captivated by his use of the term, "cry of the blood" and his description of God's response in the blood-shedding of His Son, Jesus. His description seems to capture the ambiguous quality of blood and hold in a healthy tension the two aspects of death and life.

The starting point for understanding this terminology comes from Scripture itself. *And Yahweh said, 'I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their appeal to be free of their slave-drivers. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings. I mean to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians and bring them up out of that land to a land rich and broad, a land where milk and honey flow.'* (Exodus 3, 7-8)

In this context, namely, of the suffering plight of the enslaved people in Egypt who cried out for liberation, came the compassionate response of God who would free his people.

In his encyclical the Holy Father spends a great deal of time reflecting on Chapter 4 of the Book of Genesis in which we read the story of how Cain kills his brother Abel, shedding his blood upon the ground. That blood cries to heaven for vengeance!

The Pope describes how the blood of Abel "continues to cry out from generations and generations in ever new and different ways" (# 10) from the earth. And he goes on to mention

different ways in which this blood is shed, all of which comprise what is sometimes called “a culture of death.” The blood of so many innocent ones today is a continuation of Christ’s Passion being lived out in today’s world. Their blood continues to cry out, awaiting a response.

The Pope then speaks of the Precious Blood as God’s response to the cry of Abel’s blood (Hebrews 12,24), as the source of perfect redemption and the gift of new life (*Evangelium Vitae*, # 25). Jesus is the Messiah who came to defend and to rescue the poor and the downtrodden; He is savior, redeemer, advocate for his brothers and sisters in need. He made their cause His own and gave His life in their defense. (cfr. Leviticus 25).

An essential aspect of mission is to make the blood of today’s victims heard and to respond in compassionate solidarity. He pleads in # 10: “*make the cry of your brothers and sisters heard!*” And he calls upon all Christians and peoples of good will to proclaim the *Gospel of Life* (*Evangelium Vitae*, # 82-84).

I soon discovered that to speak in terms of “the cry and the call of the blood” is a very concrete way of bringing the reflections on our spirituality down to earth, helping us to connect easily to our life’s experiences. It has become a way to focus on our identity. A missionary spirituality is by nature an incarnational one. It is a way of discovering mission and our specific contribution to the universal Church as peoples marked by the blood of Christ. Around the world, with our CPPS members, with Precious Blood women’s congregations, with numerous lay groups, I have discovered how easily people understand this language and quickly make connections. For many it has opened the way to a renewed understanding of our spirituality and a discovery of mission. It is notable how this “language” has become commonplace in the different circles of our international family of the Precious Blood.

We discover and participate in God’s mission (*Missio Dei*) according to the different charisms recognized by the Church. All missionary activity begins in God who invites us to participate in God’s mission. It is God who calls and sends us forth. As Missionaries of the Precious Blood, with a charism approved by the Church, we need discover our mission through the lens of the Precious Blood. In the words of a song we often sing in English, we are “called by the blood and sent by the blood, we are servants of the blood of Christ.”

As a society of apostolic life in the Church we are expected to enrich and to contribute to the mission of the Church from our particular identity as Missionaries of the Precious Blood. Could this not become a way of focusing on our identity and on our mission; a way which crosses over the boundaries of culture and language; a way of understanding ourselves in whatever apostolate or ministry in which we are engaged?

For in whatever society we are living the “cry of the blood” can be heard. The circumstances may be different from one place to another and in one culture or another, but wherever we find ourselves, and in whatever ministry we are involved in, the cry of the blood rises up from the very earth we walk. As we look at the world around us, we ask ourselves:

Where do we hear the cry of the blood? Where is life being threatened and needs to be defended and promoted in our diverse cultures and contexts?

The understanding of our mission begins in hearing that cry and in making the voice of the blood heard in today's society which would much rather ignore it or wish it away. For to hear the "cry of the blood" is unsettling. It disturbs our peace and challenges our comfort and securities. Just as the cry of the blood of Abel moved God to compassion and intervention to liberate humankind from all that oppresses, so too are we called to take a stance. Ultimately, the cry of the blood of Abel is what led to the shedding of Christ's blood in response. And so we who hear the cry of the blood, are also called to respond to that cry with the blood of Christ, a blood which speaks of covenant, of cross, and of reconciliation.

As Missionaries of the Precious Blood, we see the "red threads" running through everything. Just as God was moved to compassion when he heard the cry of His people in Egypt, so to we, as Missionaries, are called to mission when we hear the cry and recognize Abel's blood shed today. ***In every "cry" lies a "call" to mission.*** I have discovered over the years that as we identify the cry in whatever situation we are in or in whatever apostolate we have undertaken, we discover in that cry a call to mission. In other words, there is an intimate connection between living our Precious Blood spirituality and our ministry. Let me give a few examples.

Living Precious Blood Spirituality in Mission

Earlier in this reflection I quoted from *Evangelium Vitae* of John Paul II. His reflections on the shedding of Abel's blood and the response of the Precious Blood centers on the theme of life. That life is in the blood is central to the biblical concept of blood. Only God is Lord of Life. The Pope describes different situations of how life is taken, threatened or diminished. As Missionaries of the Precious Blood we hear those cries and seek to respond to them. In his address to the delegates of our General Assembly in September, 2001, he exhorted: *"I ask you to continue your efforts to build a civilization of life, seeking the protection of all human life, from the life of the unborn to the life of the aged and infirm, and promoting the dignity of every human person, especially the weak and of those deprived of their rightful share of the earth's abundance."* (Castelgandolfo, September 14, 2001). Thus we participate in God's mission as Jesus proclaimed: *"I have come that they may have life and have it to the full"* (John 10:10). This is what Jesus lived and died for.

Bishop Erwin Krautler in his beautiful homily delivered during the Mass of Thanksgiving the day after the canonization of St. Maria De Mattias also reminded us: *"Today our Congregation is called to continue this mission, to go where no one dares to go, to embrace those that the world rejects, to welcome those whom society today considers superfluous or to be cast out. In the faces of all the little ones, all the youth, the indigenous, the blacks, women,*

elderly, those disfigured by poverty, by violence, by neglect, we encounter the bloodied face of Christ who calls upon us and challenges us. There are millions of men and women who are hungry today, who are sick without the possibility of getting medicine; there are millions who are on the street, shoved to the edges of society, without a home, a roof, without anything. They are nailed to an infinity of crosses, but they do not ask to remain hanging on the cross forever. They want to rise and participate in the “banquet of life” that God has prepared for all his sons and daughters.” (John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, #39) The blood of life calls us to respond to their cries.

We can speak today of the marginalization that many peoples of the world suffer due to the effects of economic globalization. Individualism runs wild; broken relationships in marriages leading to a divorce rate of 50% in some countries; broken relationships in communities and between nations can be seen wherever we look and at times lead to war. Hours spent before the computer surfing the net seeking anonymous relationships poses the danger that a person no longer relates, or relates less, to real people who surround them. Many people suffer loneliness due to their physical or mental limitations, because of their age, or they are isolated because of their beliefs. To hear their cry of loneliness we can discover our call to live the spirituality of the blood of Christ which speaks of covenant, of relationships, of community building.

The blood of reconciliation, in turn, speaks to so many different situations in our lives, in society, and in our communities. Murders, acts of violence, the ravages of war, poverty, exploitations of persons for sex, sexual abuse and pedophilia, conflicts of varied sorts, our earth exploited and ravaged because of personal or corporate greed, over-indulgence, short-sightedness and lack of concern for the needs of others and the future of our planet, countries divided and polarized over politics, church communities split over different beliefs and ways of understanding our Christian commitment. All of this and many other situations speak of broken relationships and blood spilt. In that cry which rises from the earth, we hear the call of the blood of reconciliation. We discover our call to mission.

The fear of the “other,” as one who is different than I, one who thinks differently or holds different religious beliefs, or one who has a different sexual orientation, theological beliefs or pastoral praxis, often can give rise to a tendency to exclude and to marginalize. And in extreme cases even to eliminate physically the “other” who threatens to invade my safe space. This might be expressed in neo-Nazi groups or in political parties who want to limit the number of “foreigners” coming into their countries. It might be expressed through building a wall between Mexico and the United States in order to keep people out. Or it can be expressed by non-welcoming attitudes when we gather at the Eucharist table to share Christ’s body and blood. There is a cry to be heard here, sometimes from within our own religious communities or in our parishes. In their cry is our call to commitment as we strive to live and witness to a spirituality of the blood which speaks of inclusion and welcoming. Jesus outstretched his arms

on the cross and shed His blood so as to embrace all of humankind in God's love. *"When he is raised above the earth, he will draw all peoples to himself."* His heart was opened with the soldier's lance and from it flowed water and blood. In that heart all peoples can find a safe place to be in God's love. We are called by the blood of Christ to create welcoming communities wherein all can find a home, a safe place.

One of the characteristics of the society in which we live today is that of an increasing cultural diversity. It is a diversity lived around the world as almost instant communication is possible through the use of the internet and internet calling. Travel is easier than ever enabling people to experience cultural diversity first-hand. The migrations of people from the South to the North and from the Eastern European countries to the Western countries has produced a great intermingling of cultures. Of course, this is not something new in history, but today because of the ease of communications and travel we are experiencing it more frequently. This growing diversity experienced in our schools and churches, cities and villages also produces among some the tendency to close in upon themselves in order to protect their culture and traditions, seeing once again the "other" as a threat. Different expressions of racism and prejudices can flourish giving rise to tensions and conflicts, even violence. There is a cry to be heard here: a cry to be recognized, accepted, and respected and welcomed into the local community. The call of a spirituality of the Precious Blood in response to this cry is to recognize diversity as an enrichment. It is a call for us to widen the circle of community to include other cultures. The spirituality of the blood of Christ which speaks of reconciliation and of breaking down the walls which separate us, as well as the blood of the covenant (a spirituality of communion in diversity) which bespeaks community building and belonging both come into play in our response to the challenges of living with cultural diversity.

In Jesus time he had to fight against the attitude put people into categories of those saved and those excluded, of the worthy and the unclean. In our everyday life we come face to face with persons who feel they are nobody because they are excluded from the banquet table of life, due to the poverty in which they live, or to a lack of formal education. Those who cannot produce in our consumerist society are often considered of lesser value, like the sick, the elderly, those who are physically disabled or mentally disturbed. Still others can feel totally worthless or inferior due to a sin they have committed in the past, or due to wounds they have experienced in family or in community which have severely damaged their self esteem. The cries of these people can be deafening. One who lives the spirituality of the blood of Christ is attentive to their cries and looks for ways to communicate another message: that they are loved by God and are "precious" in God's eyes (1 Peter 1:18-19; Ps. 71:14). Pope Benedict XVI in a Message given on January 27, 2007 said: *"Redeemed by his blood, no human life is worthless or of little value, because all are personally loved by Him with a passionate and faithful love, a love without limits."* The Bishop-Martyr, Oscar Romero of San Salvador, expressed the same truth in a graphic phrase when he proclaimed: "God doesn't make garbage!"

In a society where we strive to avoid pain at all costs, where it is almost taboo to speak of the cross and of suffering, nevertheless the cries of those suffering from a myriad of causes cannot be avoided. Some suffering is momentary and soon passes; other suffering can accompany a person for a lifetime. We can speak of internal, emotional, spiritual suffering as well as the physical suffering brought on by disease, an accident, and trauma of many kinds. And there is the suffering of those who are persecuted for giving witness to the Gospel or for their commitment in favor of the poor and the cause of furthering justice. Even Jesus did not avoid suffering when it came. He faced it head on and converted that suffering through love into redemptive suffering. As pilgrims of compassion and solidarity with the suffering of this world, the blood of the Cross calls us to be instruments of hope. Like Simon of Cyrene in the Gospel, we shoulder the crosses and suffering of others in solidarity.

In a world dedicated to worshipping the –isms of hedonism, consumerism, and materialism in a search for meaning and happiness, as Missionaries of the Precious Blood we are called to witness to an alternative life-style, one which presents Jesus' life as the Way and the Truth. Jesus teaches us that true happiness and fullness of life is achieved through love. Not any kind of love, but love which speaks of a life poured out for others. It is in His self-giving to the point of shedding His Blood for us on the Cross that the fullness of life is achieved. In the midst of the diversity of “cries” that we hear each day, there is a cry of many who are tired of the –isms, of those who have come to realize that the answer doesn't lie there. They are searching for meaning, for something or someone who can help them find the answer and the way. There are false prophets who try to convince that happiness is achieved in finding the fountain of eternal youth, in physical beauty and wellness, in economic success, in power, authority and titles. Many have tried those paths but they always come to a dead end. The thirst for meaning and happiness is not satisfied. The spirituality of the blood of Christ calls us to be faithful witnesses to the Way Jesus offered. We are called to be happy followers of Jesus who generously pour out our lives to serve others and in doing so find true meaning and source of happiness , a happiness that endures. Hopefully, it will be a witness which evokes a generous response in others as well.

The spirituality of the Precious Blood which speaks of life, of reconciliation and covenant, is of course especially suited to the task and responds to the great challenges facing us in our globalized world. Our response to the cry of the blood is the response given in Jesus Christ, namely, His Precious Blood shed so that all would have the fullness of life. For it is from the resources of our spirituality of the blood of Christ that we respond to the cry of the blood! Our response flows from the blood of Christ!

There is a very close connection between our spirituality of the blood of Christ and our call to mission. In fact, I would say that the spirituality of the blood of Christ offers us precisely that: a spirituality of mission. It is a spirituality for mission deeply rooted in Scripture and which responds to the great quests of men and women today as I tried to indicate briefly

above. We both discover our call to mission through our spirituality as well as we are nourished by that very spirituality so that we are able to live our mission.

Lessons learned from my Experience

I have spoken above of the cry and the call of the blood. These are categories which can help us discover our mission and live from our spirituality. However, we need to have ears that hear and eyes to see, if we are to get anywhere. This presumes a style of prayer which will assist us in developing this sensitivity. I have discovered that contemplation in action can be of great help in discerning the signs of the times and in hearing the cry and in discerning how the spirituality of the blood calls us to respond. It is a style of prayer which takes into account our everyday life and experiences, the people we meet along the way and the situations we face. In contemplation we try through the help of the Spirit to see God's image in the other person and to hear the Word of God yearning to be set free. It is a prayer of discernment. In a religious community such a style of prayer can be particularly beneficial in discerning the cry and the call, since several sets of ears and eyes are better than one. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament should also lead us to discover and to revere the presence of God in others, calling us to respond in generous love to the suffering Christ today. John Paul II in the same address to our Delegates at the XVII General Assembly in 2001 reminded us that *"mission springs from the depths of contemplation in which the believer learns to recognize and appreciate the almost divine dignity of every human being and can exclaim with ever renewed and grateful wonder: 'How precious must man be in the eyes of the Creator if he gained so great a Redeemer!'"* (cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, #25) As missionaries we journey into the lives of others stepping gently and with awe since we trod on sacred ground.

The spirituality of the blood of Christ is a missionary spirituality. It constantly calls us to leave behind our comfort zones to journey into the rugged pathways of others lives. The cry and the call of the Blood invite us to journey into the heart of the Paschal Mystery which lies at the core of Christian life and of the spirituality of the blood of Christ. It calls us, as Pope John Paul II said to us when he addressed us in General Assembly, "to go where others don't want to go." Maybe we don't want to go either. There is a sort of messiness in a spirituality of the blood. Sometimes we'd rather not go down that road. The cry might call us to venture into "foreign territory," to previously uncharted areas, into cultures and subcultures alien to us. To be willing to respond in answer to the cry and the call of the blood, we must be flexible and willing to be lead "along the road marked by blood." To go it alone is not easy. Together we can support and encourage one another. (My own experience now, in being called to assist another Ecclesial Family in great need of healing and reconciliation, just when I was settling down here in Salzburg.) If we wish to be statues, then being a Missionary of the Precious Blood is not our calling! Our missionary feet should only be cemented in the heart of our Pilgrim God.

To live this missionary spirituality, we will be called to live the attitude of *kenosis* (Phil. 2.5), of emptying ourselves in order to walk in solidarity and compassion with the other. We need to let go of our prejudices, recognize our own veiled or not so veiled prejudices, to leave behind a sense of cultural superiority, in order to learn, to be enriched, and to be evangelized by those with whom we journey. First we must be willing to receive their gifts, if we are ever able to share ours. With Paul, we seek to be “all things to all people.” To live a spirituality of *kenosis* is to become vulnerable.

In all that I have shared in this reflection it is clear that we are called to living in a permanent attitude of conversion, constantly cutting away and leaving behind, shedding excess baggage in poverty and simplicity, and keeping spiritually fit, so as follow in the missionary feet of our Redeemer. To be persons of covenant, of reconciliation, of affirmation of the dignity and worth of others, persons of hospitality and welcoming, persons of hope in the midst of suffering, requires constant personal conversion and growth so that we are witnessing to what we ourselves have and are experiencing. The very spirituality we profess and which calls us to mission, is also our best resource to prepare us for that mission.

The celebration of the Eucharist is a special moment in the life of a missionary. In its celebration we go to the heart of our faith and drink from the fountain of our Precious Blood spirituality (cf *Normative Texts*, C4). It is in the Eucharistic celebration that the Lord comes to give sight to our eyes which are often blind; to give hearing to our deaf ears; and to untie the shackles which bind our feet, our hands, and sometimes even our hearts. Only then, freed from all that binds us, can we fulfill our mission in today’s globalized world.

In the Eucharist we offer the cup of suffering, into which we pour the cries and sufferings we have encountered on our journey. We place those lives with their sufferings and joys into the bigger picture of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. And we drink from the cup of hope which nourishes us for our mission to bring the healing balm of the blood of Christ to our wounded and fractured world.

And we are encouraged by the example of our founder, St. Gaspar, the great Apostle of the Precious Blood (cf *Normative Texts*, C22), of St. Maria de Matthias, of Venerable John Merlini, and a host of fellow Missionaries, priests, brothers, and lay women and men, who have walked before us and who have lived in faithful fidelity our missionary charism.

It is through living our mission in and through the spirituality of the blood of Christ that we will make our specific contribution to the construction of a new world order, that New Jerusalem, more human and more just and one that reflects more faithfully God’s dream for humankind, as revealed in Jesus, and made possible through the blood of the Lamb.

Discussion questions

In his presentation Barry has continued his leadership of helping us to reflect on Precious Blood spirituality and to learn how to embody or live that spirituality. Today he has applied his own

reflections and understanding of Precious Blood spirituality to the issue/question of mission so that our mission will flow from the blood of Christ. He said:

The spirituality of the Precious Blood which speaks of life, of reconciliation and covenant, is of course especially suited to the task and responds to the great challenges facing us in our globalized world.

In the context or situation of your unit of the congregation,

What is the work that will:

- 1) Proclaim the message of life?**
- 2) Promote reconciliation?**
- 3) Establish faithful covenants through community building?**