

1. Challenges to Our Identity and Mission

It is a pleasure for me to meet you during the celebration of your Fifteenth General Chapter which you are holding in this city where your Founder was born and exercised part of his priestly ministry -- the great missionary and apostle of the Blood of Christ, Saint Gaspar del Bufalo. It is significant that this meeting takes place almost on the eve of the day in which your Congregation and the Diocese of Rome celebrate the liturgical memorial of this Saint. Like so many of the faithful, we too go in spirit to his tomb in the ancient church of Santa Maria in Trivio, as did my predecessor Pope John XXIII, on January 4, 1963, to meditate on the lessons of his life and to beg his heavenly favors.

More than a few times Pope John XXIII linked Saint Gaspar in a symbolic way to the devotion to the Most Precious Blood, going so far as to call him 'the true and greatest apostle of the devotion to the Most Precious Blood in the world'. Saint Gaspar invites us to reflect on the mystery of the Blood of Christ flowing forth from the side of 'him whom they have pierced' (Jn. 19:37). What boundless horizons this reflection opens up to us! On the one hand, that Blood, shed violently for the injustices of mankind, is the symbol of every violence perpetrated in the history of mankind, beginning with the cry of the blood of Abel (cf. Gen. 4:10) until the end of the world. On the other hand, that Blood can be seen as a symbol of the whole work of salvation, which, originating from the Father, reaches even to us and is spread throughout the world for the salvation of all through the ministry of the Church of God 'which he obtained with the blood of his own Son' (Acts 20:28). In the vision of faith of your holy Founder, the Blood of Christ is an image of the Redeemer's perfect love for us, and calls for a response of faithful love of God and of our brethren.

In his assiduous study of the word of God and of the holy Fathers of the Church, his contemplation of the Crucified Christ and his sufferings for the sake of the Church, Saint Gaspar delved deeply into the mystery of the Blood of the Redeemer, so much so that this mystery became the light of his spirit and the strength of his apostolic activity.

Dear brothers: I wish to repeat on this occasion the exhortation I made on October 22, 1986, on the second centenary of the birth of your Founder: 'The spirituality of Saint Gaspar...is truly at the heart of the Christian life: the Most Precious Blood of our Lord has always been the object of a special attention on the part of all the Saints: it is the school of sanctity, of justice, of love...Never cease...to delve deeply into this mystery of justice and of love: diffuse it into the whole world.'

I was pleased to be informed of the meetings and studies which you have been conducting on this subject in the various parts of the world where your Congregation works. I wholeheartedly bless these efforts and encourage you to continue them, and to model on the cult of the Precious Blood the spiritual path of your lives and your apostolic activity. Be witnesses of that communion which Christ brought about through the gift of his Blood.

I am certain that Saint Gaspar, in this spiritual pilgrimage that we make together to his tomb, can speak to you not only as the Apostle of the Blood of Christ, but also as a great missionary. After his return from exile in February of 1814 and in response to the wishes of Pope Pious VII who strove to revive the faith among the Christian people by means of popular missions, your Founder devoted himself to the preaching of missions and spiritual retreats up until his death in 1837. In the ministry of preaching, he emulated his special patron, Saint Francis Xavier. For the most efficacious and lasting exercise of that ministry he founded your Society: the Congregation of the Missionaries of the Most Precious Blood, entrusting it to the heavenly protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He was firmly convinced that just as the faith is spread through preaching of the word of God, so through the same preaching 'its revival is awaited' (Writings of Saint Gaspar, XII, 48). Your Founder is a model of evangelization, whom you must always imitate.

In the General Chapter which you are celebrating, you have studied the specific topic of the mission of your Congregation, making an analysis of the situation in the various places where you work in order to meet present challenges according to the charism of your Congregation. This charism, in fact, is the ministry of the word of God, as stated in the Constitution of your Congregation. In a society which too often ignores the signs of the presence of God, you must be the word that knocks at the door of every human heart, so that it may open to receive the Savior. In a society which often fails to uphold human dignity, especially the dignity of the poor, you must awaken the voice of conscience that sustains the primacy of truth and love. You are called to do this in many forms of apostolic activity but especially through the preaching of spiritual exercises, retreats and missions (cf. CIC, can. 770).

My dear brothers: I fervently hope that the teachings which we have learned from the life of your Founder -- contemplation of the mystery of the Blood of Christ and commitment to the ministry of the word -- will be an inspiration for your personal and communitarian renewal, so that you may present yourselves to the people of God, not only as teachers of the word, but also as convinced witnesses to Christ, who loved us and gave his Blood for us (cf. Gal. 2:20).

I commend your Congregation to the intercession of the Ever-Virgin Mary, and gladly impart to you my Apostolic Blessing.

(Message of Pope John Paul II to the Members of the XV General Assembly, Rome, October 19, 1989)

An anniversary, whether personal or of the community, is also a time to reflect upon one's life. In so doing, we Missionaries of the Precious Blood must ask for forgiveness:

- because we have not always been faithful to our vocation as Missionaries of the Precious Blood,
- for not dedicating ourselves more intensely to the preaching of the Word of God,
- for not irradiating a deep devotion and a spirituality of the Precious Blood,
- for the deficiency in our endeavor of community living, which should be a true sign of solidarity to all,
- for our slowness in showing compassion and charity,
- for not giving preference to the poor and neglected.

On the personal level we ask forgiveness:

- for our individualism and selfishness,
- for being lax in our commitments,
- for giving example which, many times, scandalizes,
- for our lack of witness,
- for not giving up all to follow the Lord ("I'll follow you Lord, BUT..."),
- for our pharisaic attitude which demands of others more than what we ourselves are willing to give,
- for not living our celibacy as a convincing sign of the presence of the Kingdom of God and of a love that is free and mature.

As Community we ask forgiveness:

- for our incapacity to work together and develop a clear projection of our Vicariate,
- for our different models of Church and individual interests when they keep us from acquiring a clear identity as Precious Blood Missionaries,
- for not always accompanying the laity in the development of their Christian vocation and in their desire to live the Precious Blood spirituality,
- for not knowing how to tap the talent and vision of our members, and simply reacting in the face of immediate needs, without taking risks and without venturing into new apostolic challenges,
- for not having the wisdom to trustingly choose youth who want to follow the Lord in the Consecrated Life,
- for not accompanying the people in their aspirations and in their holistic development,
- for not taking up the cause of the poor and for not standing beside them in the conquest of their just rights.

We ask forgiveness for all of this and for much more. We ask forgiveness of the Lord and of the People of God. In some way, I hope that this celebration be the manifestation of our desire to correct our errors and by the grace of God, experience a sincere conversion. May the Lord help us to have a better understanding of our identity and to be a community more united and more faithful to its mission and to the challenge of our Founder.

By means of a contemplative life and persistent prayer, we could grow in our faith, discover our prophetic mission and respond to our Church which calls us to renewal and conversion.

(Fr. Larry Eiting, C.P.P.S., from his last homily, preached on the Feast of St. Gaspar, October 21, 1990, Santiago, Chile)