

The Call of the Blood in Catholic Schools: To Be Workshops of a New Culture

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Introduction

It is a great joy for me to participate with you in this Second Seminar, since we will be going more deeply in our understanding of two themes which are of great interest to me: Catholic education and the spirituality of the Blood of Christ. The mystery of Christ's Blood is very rich in meaning and it is important to discover its contribution to each area of the Church's pastoral activity. This Seminar provides us with the opportunity to deepen the theme of the spirituality of the Precious Blood in the specific field of catholic education.

Another distinguishing aspect of this Seminar is its "international character", expressed in the presence of delegations from several countries and continents. This fact reminds us that we are not alone in our daily efforts and that we are part of something bigger than ourselves, of something which transcends geographic and linguistic frontiers. We belong to that great family of educators who labor under the banner of Christ's Precious Blood.

I would like to repeat the words of Mr. Ricardo Burrows in his closing address to the First Seminar in Santiago, Chile: "Thank you (oh God), for seeing a dream come true: that of a gathering of brothers and sisters, united by a spirituality and a common vocation, at the service of God's Project."

Culture: the Field of our Educational Mission

As I begin my reflections on Catholic education in the light of the spirituality of the Blood, I would like to situate the theme in a broader context: that of the Church's mission. The Church, called to continue today the work of Jesus Christ has as its axial point, the construction of God's Reign. Her mission is one which belongs not only to bishops, priests, and religious, but to all of God's People. By Baptism, ALL of us are Church and we are all responsible for her mission. We are a "people-in-mission".

The specific realm of our mission as christian educators is in the field of the Catholic school and culture. The school becomes for us our **mission field**, the place where all the members who comprise the educational community are called to build a community which reflects the values of the Reign and which makes visible Christ's presence in her structures and in her activity; as a community of faith, and as a

mission field, Christ is the Center, the Great Teacher, and the permanent Point of Reference of the Catholic school.

Evangelization is at the center of the missionary activity of the Church. Our mission of Evangelization is carried out especially in the world of culture. “**Culture**”, in the terms which Pope Paul VI used in speaking of it in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelic nuntiandi*, means: “**the criterion for judging, the determining values, the points of interest, the way of thinking, the sources of inspiration, and the models of life**” (#19) of a group of people. Seen in this light we can affirm that each school lives and breathes its own culture, which is reflected in its particular way of organizing herself, and in its body of rules and projects. Our mission consists first of all in “evangelizing the culture of our own school communities”, that is to say, the culture of our schools should be inspired clearly by the values of the Reign of God which are reflected in its way of being and doing. The school, therefore, will become as it were a “hot house” in which our students are formed and in which they are prepared to take up their mission in society; as “missionary laborers” capable of struggling on all fronts of society and of life, for the development of that (new) culture”, as Fr. Antonio Lagos said in his inaugural discourse at the First Seminar in Santiago. All of us are responsible for creating the appropriate environment in which the youth can be formed as persons, agents of change and creators of this new society.

And we also must remember that every school community is situated in a social-cultural context to which it must respond. This reality will also influence the way the mission of evangelization is lived within a given community. During this Seminar we will have the opportunity to become acquainted with the diversity of contexts in which our schools are located, and also the particular challenges which each reality presents to the task of education.

We will be reflecting on our distinctive character as educational communities under the direction of Religious Congregations which form part of the great “Family of the Precious Blood”: the Adorers of the Blood of Christ of Blessed Maria de Mattias and the Missionaries of the Precious Blood of St. Gaspar. During this Seminar we will attempt to discover together the contribution which the Blood of Christ makes to the educational task.

Our Mission in light of the Blood of Christ

As we begin to reflect on the spirituality of the Blood, it is important to clarify the term “spirituality”. When I speak of “**spirituality**”, I understand it to mean a way of following the Lord which **embraces all the life** of a person. It does not consist simply in living a spiritual and interior life expressed in prayer and in pious practices, but rather it is something which is incarnated in history and in concrete situations, reflecting in our way of living the totality of our existence. The Apostle James in his Letter reminds us that “a faith which does not translate into concrete works, is something dead”. Thus the Spirituality of the Blood has to be translated into life within our schools. For a spirituality is about the following of Christ, on a pilgrimage

of faith, in the sphere of our vocation as Christian educators. The spirituality of the Blood helps us to clarify our mission, offering us a way of focusing education and of shaping the school's culture.

Having clarified the term spirituality, we should now ask ourselves: What are some of the central elements of a spirituality of the Blood which can impel us in the realm of education?

A Workshop of Life

For the Hebrews of the Old Testament, blood symbolized "life". In the pages of the Book of Leviticus (17:11-14) and of Deuteronomy (12:23), we read that "*the life of every human being is in its blood*", and that "*blood is life*". In the ancient Jewish rituals the blood of animals was used as a means of communicating life between God and the people. It was with the blood of animals that the Covenant between God and his People was ratified.

Jesus, in the New Testament, gave his life, shedding his blood, in order to re-establish the intimate relationship between man and God which had been broken by sin, and in this way He establishes the New Covenant. He describes himself as the One who came "so that we might have life, and life in abundance" (John 10:10). His life was a constant giving of Himself to others so that life would grow towards its fullness. Fr. Robert Schreiter in his final synthesis of the Seminar in Chile said to us that "the Blood of Christ outlines for us the world of life...And, in our schools a commitment to the life of each one of our students is taken up, appreciating them as persons."

It seems to me that this is the first challenge we face as educators working under the standard of the Blood of Christ: to be workshops of life! We recall as well the words of St. Peter in his First Letter: "We have been saved, not with silver nor gold, but with the Blood of Jesus" (1:18-19). Every life is precious. Every life is worth the Blood of Jesus. We have an enormous obligation before us in the lives of so many young people who are entrusted to us. We need to appreciate them, love them, and see them with the eyes of Jesus. Psalm 72, v. 14 also reminds us that "life is precious in God's eyes."

In our workshop of life **people** are much more important than schedules, structures, and regulations. We are committed to people, with those concrete people we have before us in the classroom and whithwhom we chat in the corridors. Our commitment is to them, to the promotion of their well-being and to their growth towards "a life in abundance." Time spent in school and outside of it, dialoguing and sharing with the student, is never time wasted.

As Jesus carried out his life-giving mission, he stood at the side of the weaker and poorer ones in society, in order to protect and to advance their life towards fulfillment. This option would eventually lead to Jesus shedding his Blood on the cross. Following in the footsteps of Jesus, the great Master of Life, we educators

show a special predilection towards the weaker and more fragile ones among us. We constantly need to ask ourselves: “Who are the weaker students? Who are those who most need to discover the truth about themselves, that their lives indeed are precious?”

Pope John Paul II in his Encyclical **Evangelium Vitae** (#5) says: *“The present encyclical wishes to be therefore a precious and vigorous reaffirmation of the value and the inviolability of human life. At the same time it is an urgent call to each and every person, in the name of God: **respect, protect, love and serve life, the life of every human being.**”*

In this atmosphere of acceptance and human warmth, in which the sacredness of the life of each person is celebrated, persons will be formed who are capable of creating “a culture of life” in a society where often “a culture of death” reigns. Today in the world the human person is often little appreciated and the blood he sheds is often considered cheap. We live in a world in which human rights are flagrantly violated, from the very conception of life until death. We are living in the era of assisted suicides, of euthanasia, of mass assassinations and of capital punishment. It is a world in which millions and millions of people shed their blood drop by drop each day due to the scourge of poverty and misery. In the midst of this “regnant culture of death” we wish to proclaim the sacredness of life, of all life. In our “workshops of life” we will struggle against a society which sustains that a person is worth what he earns, or the balance he has in his bank account. We will struggle against a society which values a person for his/her fame, or beauty, or by the clothes or the sports shoes he wears, or by the place where he goes for vacation.

As we protect and promote the precious life of every one of our students, we will form persons who value their life and that of others, as well as that of all created things. They will be sensitive persons, capable of being moved by the suffering and the marginalization of so many brothers and sisters in society. They will be people capable of defending the dignity of each human person and to communicate to them with their solidarity and commitment that their life also is worth the Blood of Jesus.

The Holy Father reminds us in the aforementioned Encyclical, **Evangelium vitae**, that “it is precisely in the contemplation of the precious blood of Christ, the sign of his abnegated love (cf. John 13:1), that the believer learns to recognize and to appreciate the almost divine dignity of each human being and to exclaim with renewed gratefulness and awe: “How precious is man in the eyes of his Creator!” (#25).

Jesus affirmed the life of others, by loving them and accepting them as they were. His love was a generous, inclusive, and unconditional one. His Blood shed on the Cross is an eloquent sign of his love-without-limits, given “to the extreme”. He confirmed his option to love without boundaries during the Last Supper when he took bread and wine in his hands and he gave them to his disciples saying: “This is my Body broken and my Blood shed for you, so that you might have life.” Jesus was a man who lived for others. Each word and every one of his gestures were a revelation of his love for us. Our challenge and our constant call consist in filling ourselves up with Jesus’ Love so that our words and actions reflect God’s Love in the daily relationships with our colleagues and students. Christ has to grow in us until we are able to love with His Love, which is patient and compassionate including even those students who test our patience. They are the ones who most need us. St. John Bosco, the great educator of youth, said one time that “for these young people (orphans and abandoned) I will make whatever sacrifice: I would even voluntarily give my blood in order to save them.”

We strive to make present in the midst of our cultural setting the Love of Christ which is at the heart of the construction of God’s Reign. Our vocation as educators calls us to show the face of God’s unconditional love to our students. Teilhard de Chardin once wrote: “Some day, after we have tamed the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we will tame for God the energies of love. And then, for the second time in the history of the world, we will discover fire.” As educators we wish to find the passion of our God and to free the energies of God’s love in our educational communities.

In a society locked in its own individualism and egocentricity, we are called to create a culture whose driving force is love. Meditating on the Blood of Jesus we will discover what John Paul II described one time in Brazil, as “the greatest joy in all the world: that of knowing that we are loved by God.” We will fulfill our mission in the measure in which we are passionately committed to the journey of love as Jesus lived it.

Each day we pray to the Lord so that we might be “living chalices” in order to be filled with his Loving Presence: “Make of me a chalice so that I might offer my life today so as to satisfy my students’ thirst for love.” And so our schools will be transformed into communities which favor the growth and the development of the person, in an environment of love and affirmation. The warmth and the authenticity of the human relationships in the educational community create an adequate space which will permit this human growth. In this way, in a society which offers people so many easy and seductive roads leading to the happiness they desire, we in our workshops of love, will propose to the young person the road Jesus took as the only sure one: “that of love.”

A Workshop of Reconciliation

One of the most evident characteristics of society today is the increasing cultural plurality in which we live. While the world is growing together and cultures are more intermingled and mixed with ever-growing ease, the previously strict and clear boundaries are becoming blurred. As a result, one of the greatest challenges we face in society today is that of living in harmony within this increasing cultural plurality. Obviously, it is not an easy task.

Already one can observe certain negative reactions to this world-wide mixing of cultures. There is a new explosion of racism and intolerance against all those who “aren’t like I am”. Some groups tend to close themselves in on themselves in an attempt to preserve their own cultural identity. But this increasing mixture of cultures only promises to grow with time. What does the Blood of Christ say to this situation?

We stand before one of the most challenging aspects of the spirituality of the Blood: that of reconciliation. “But you who before were far off have now been brought near in the blood of Christ”, St. Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians. “He is our peace, and it is He who has made from two, one, by breaking down the wall of hostility which separated us...He came to announce the Good News of peace to those who were afar and to those who are near. Through him both of us now have access to the Father in one Spirit” (Ephesians 2:13-18).

Sin is what divides us and convinces us of the lie which makes us see differences as threats and which creates a world of competition and rivalries. Sin gives birth to envy and hatred, to revenge and to wars. The Blood of Christ places us once again in the proper relationship to others. It reveals to us the fundamental truth that we are all brothers and sisters, and it helps us to appreciate the differences and to see in them a source of enrichment instead of cause for rivalry and conflict.

In our workshop of reconciliation inspired in the Blood of Christ, we wish to create bridges between the diverse cultures, in order to tear down the walls of hatred, of racism, and of prejudice which create obstacles for living together in community and in society. We strive to live and to promote an atmosphere of deep respect and dialogue.

Our educational communities also tend to reflect the same differences which exist in the broader society. The fact is that among us there is a great variety of opinions, styles, formation, political and ecclesial positions, and also character differences. Among the students and among ourselves, we are called to be instruments of the Blood of Christ, ambassadors of reconciliation, builders of a new community in which all can live together united in love, inspite of our differences.

And also, in the educational community one learns to solve problems and to reconcile differences through dialogue and not through violence nor through the law of the strongest. Growing up and being educated in such an atmosphere of respect and dialogue will prepare the young person to take his/her place in society as a person who is capable of dialogue and of communicating with others in a multicultural society. The Blood of Christ calls us to broaden the horizons of our known and familiar worlds in order to know and to appreciate the cultures of others, and to leave behind us the temptation of feeling culturally superior. We are called to

grow in love and in appreciation of this cultural diversity, recognizing the presence of God and of God's revelation in all the cultures.

A Workshop of Community

To live a spirituality of the Blood is to live in Covenant, which is a central theme of the Bible. In the Old Testament, as was said previously, it was the blood of animals spilt upon the altar and sprinkled on the people that sealed the Covenant between God and the Hebrew slaves in the desert, making them into a People. In the New Testament, Jesus inaugurated a "New Covenant", sealing it with his Blood shed on the Cross. He opened his arms on the Cross and gave his life in order to create a new humanity in which all would live in a great fraternity. To live in love as Jesus showed us and to be reconciled in his Blood, are already two concrete manifestations of this New Covenant. Fr. Paco Gil in his introductory address in the First Seminar proposed as a model, the school as "a home of fraternity", in a full-time school of love.

We wish to create communities which overcome individualism and impersonalism which privilege warm and welcoming human relationships, and which invite others to share our joys and sorrow, our worries and struggles, our aspirations and our dreams in a climate of respect and of trust. Our educational communities have to be more than just a place to work and to study. In these workshops of communion and of participation, each person has a place and an importance.

We, with our style of life and with our manner of relating to one another in community, wish to show to a fragmented and divided society that true community is possible; that interdependence is much more important than the affirmation of our autonomy and individualism. This means that our schools reflect in their organization a true participation and communion of all the constituencies, living a style of human relationships which are truly of dialogical and participative.

Open to solidarity

In the Old Testament, authenticity and faithfulness to the Covenant were measured by the law of the "go'el", that is, by the measure of commitment that the community had to the weakest and most needy members (see Leviticus 25: 23-55). To defend an impoverished member of the clan was the same as defending the Covenant. One of the most ancient and beautiful titles which the first Christians used when speaking of Jesus was that of "go'el" which can be translated as: defender, redeemer, liberator, lawyer, or big brother. The Holy Father in his Encyclical ***Evangelium vitae*** challenges us today to be "go'els" of the poor, whose lives are threatened by the poverty and misery in which they live, negating their dignity and bleeding them of their life, drop by drop. The Blood of Christ calls us to defend the bonds of our Covenant, by taking up the cause of the poor and needy.

We are able to measure the depth of commitment to live as a covenant people in our school communities, by examining the extent of our commitment towards the poor

among us. How do we defend their life? How do we respond to them and their needs? For we cannot be truly in solidarity with the poor of other places, if we are not in solidarity with those who live under the same roof with us. We will prepare our young people to be persons of solidarity with the poor they encounter in society, in the measure in which they are formed in a milieu which is truly one of solidarity.

We wish to build communities, workshops of solidarity, open to the world and to society, communities which are capable of making their own the cause of the poor and marginalized. It is necessary to create instances in which the young people and the other members in community can experience life and the situation of “the others”, coming to know their world, sharing with them, and establishing true fraternal relationships. Experiences such as missions and programs of solidarity are important elements in this quest, as are the internal instances in the school itself which are geared to sensitizing the members of the school community to the needs of the other members. Opportunities to live in solidarity both within the school community and in society are necessary and important. In this way solidarity can be discovered as a fundamental value in the following of Christ and as an essential element in the construction of a new society.

a critical attitude

So that these experiences might be educative and formative ones, there have to be serene moments of evaluation and reflection in community, in the light of our faith, so that the causes of poverty and injustices might be discovered, and to afford the possibility to discern together the answers which the Gospel asks of us.

In order to prepare our youth to be agents of change in society, it is very important to develop by all means possible a healthy and constructive critical attitude that will allow them later on to engage themselves in society, not as part of the masses, but as persons, protagonists of history and capable of discerning amid innumerable stimuli and messages bombarding them daily, that which really is worthwhile and that which is dispensable. Thus they will be able to discern the true value which promote the construction of a new society, and the dysvalues which strike against the person and true human development.

Our Schools: Bridges to a New Culture

All that I have said thus far is about “the dream of a school which is inspired in the Blood of Christ”: a school which is a creative space of an **alternative culture**, the birthplace of a new society. It is the dream of a school which recovers **a prophetic mission**, by constructing an educational system that be an prelude and an announcement of this new world creating an atmosphere which reflects in its being and doing the values of the Reign of God it proposes. It is a dream of a school as a

workshop of a new culture, capable of *forming persons* as subjects of their own destiny and agents of change and of transformation of society, promoters of human-christian values which they have already experienced and tasted in the interior of their own educational communities.

It is about making real “the Profile of a new humanity and a community in which the new humanity will flourish”, as Fr. Robert Schreiter said in his closing remarks at the First Seminar. It is a profile “coherent with the principles of our spirituality and incarnated in the social realities in which we work and live.” It is in living with faithfulness our mission of being “workshops of a new culture”, that we will make a contribution which is clear and real to society, **being bridges** between the actual culture and the new one which is to be born.

A Project of the Entire Educational Community

The responsibility for carrying out an Educational Project of such significance has to be one that is taken up by the entire educational community. It is not the task only of the religious Congregation, nor only of the Direction and Administration, nor just of the professors. The task of creating a new school culture involves everyone, including the parents of the pupils and, of course, the students themselves. The commitment and the widespread participation of the members of all the constituencies of the school is required. We must ask ourselves: what is expected of the students? And, how can the parents of the pupils who might be living a different and even contradictory project within their own families, be committed to the project? Fr. Paco Gil said it well in his address during the First Seminar: “The christian educator of a School of the Precious Blood should be the first one to become inebriated with the drink of Jesus Christ. By participating in the fountains of life, in the chalice of salvation, he or she should experience in his own life the joy of liberation and he will then be able to intone the alleluia of communion.”

In times when the number of Religious personnel in our schools is diminishing, the principal role of the Congregations, it seems to me, should center on contributing that which is specific to the Congregation: the spirituality of the Blood of Christ, and to be the guarantee that the aspects of this spirituality do indeed inspire and are reflected in the life and in the daily work of our schools. Efficacious and stimulating means must be found to deepen these themes with the professors, and also with the other constituencies in the school.

Mr. Ricardo Burrows in his closing address at the First Seminar left us with this challenge: “As formators, parents, professors and religious, we cannot inure ourselves to a society which each day assaults us as people. We should open our hearts to the constant challenges which the Holy Father makes to us to evangelize the culture, inviting us to recreate the dignity of man and to reassert his transcendence.”

Need for a Constant Conversion

A community which is the creator of a new culture is necessarily called constantly to a conversion, both in the personal lives of the members of the community, as well as in the institutional structures of the community. This new culture, inspired by the Gospel values, must take root in the heart and in the mentality of each person, as well as in the very structures of the School, in its internal rules, its disciplinary system, and in the different modes of participation. If this does not happen, then the Educational Project which is proposed will be stillborn, or simply, a dead letter on a piece of paper.

We know through experience, that change and conversion never come easily nor do they come without pain. It takes nine months for a woman to give birth to a child, but the creation of a new culture has no fixed time! It depends on the rhythm of God's grace and our personal freedom in responding to and cooperating with that grace. Only a community which is willing to pay the price and to undergo the birth pains, will have the joy of seeing the new creature born. St. Gaspar used to say many times, "The Work is born among thorns." And Cardinal Suenens once said: "Happy are those who dream dreams, and who are willing to pay the price to make them reality!"

As Christians involved in the beautiful and challenging mission of education, we must make a fundamental decision about our lives. We must choose between being the children of an old world which is dying, or to be the fathers and mothers of a new world to be born. By the very fact that we are here, we are announcing that our choice is to be "parents" of a new culture. Our challenge is to live in such a way in our personal and institutional lives that the young people with whom we share and whom we serve, can open themselves freely to follow in their own lives the way that we have found and follow: the way of Jesus, as the only true road to the fullness of life and to that deep happiness which is the desired goal of every human being.

This Seminar is a clear invitation to transform our school communities into a mission field where daily, from within the educational process itself, we participate in Christ's mission, promoting here and now that which was his passion: the construction of the Reign of God! And thus we wish to incarnate in our communities and in our educational projects "*the promise of a New Covenant* which presents us with the vision of a new humanity living in a new and just society", in the words of Fr. Robert Schreiter in his final synthesis at the First Seminar.

Conclusion

I invite you to live these days of the Seminar in the climate of a great Eucharistic Celebration. In our reflections and dialogues, and in the diverse moments of sharing, we will be "breaking the bread" of our lives, with all its joys and sorrows, successes and failures. We will be sharing our life experiences in the light of our faith, as educational communities under the banner of Christ's Blood. And, we will be sharing, as well, "the Cup of Wine", a cup of hope, as we dream together the kind of school we would like to be and the educational project which will incarnate that dream.

As the disciples of Emmaus, we hope that at the end of these days we experience together, sharing in friendship and fraternity the bread and wine of our lives, we will return filled with joy and hope to our own communities, to those concrete realities which engage us most deeply with all their challenges and contradictions. God willing, we will return there with renewed strength, with our vision a little clearer, and about all, **with a fire and passion which consume us**, so being able to infect others with our enthusiasm and with the force of our convictions!

Barry Fischer, C.P.P.S.