

## Covenant, Cross, Chalice

If we see the ministry of the **Covenant** as central to what we do, then our special focus and contribution to the overall mission of the Church would center around two things: community-building and communication. In the ministries of the Church which we would undertake, a special trademark would be concern for building up the bonding which is the cement of community. We would be interested in overcoming the isolation which individuals feel and which the individualism of our culture makes us particularly prone to. We would help people find their identity in their relation to God and to one another. That would be fostered particularly by our helping people break down the obstacles to communication, that their realities might be expressed fully and without oppression.

Our motive in this: the Covenant, New and Everlasting, made with us in the shedding of Christ's Blood. Gaspar saw this ministry in the ministry of renewal, which should lead to a renewed awareness of our relation to God and God's great love for us. The shedding of Christ's own Blood reveals to us at once the great love which is the source of any meaningful life, and the violence and death which constantly threaten it. It also opens up the possibility for a Eucharistic spirituality, in which the hopes and hungers of the human heart are taken up. And it certainly reinforces our tradition of hospitality.

I would suggest that we explore situations in our ministry which address problems of bonding and communication. In bonding: fidelity in marriage and other commitments, the isolation of the elderly, the commitment to a full and consistent ethic of life, the inclusion of those oppressed and marginalized in our society. In communication: those escapes from communication into alcohol and drug abuse, those breakdowns of communication in marriages and families and local communities.

The **cross** stands at the center of our history. It is through the bloodshedding on the cross that we have been saved, been brought back into relationship with God. The cross symbolizes the great paradox in Christian faith: life can come about through death, the weakness and powerlessness of suffering can be the road to strength, the instrument of human shame becomes the throne of divine glory. The cross, as the altar of sacrifice through the Son unites earth and heaven, marks the overcoming of death through the death of one person.

The Blood is, of course, the prime symbol of that death. The Blood of Christ, in which the very divine life was lodged, is shed utterly in this violent act. But out of that shedding has come new life, the Church, and the enduring grace by which we are all freed from everlasting death. The Blood of the cross speaks to us of unjust suffering, of sacrifice and consecration, of the weak overtaking the powerful.

What would such a spirituality of the cross mean for our mission as the Society of the Precious Blood? If we see the ministry of the cross as central to what we do, then our special focus and contribution to the mission of the Church would center around our commitment to those who suffer. A trademark of our ministry would be the special attention we give to those who suffer: from physical illness, from mental anguish, from circumstances in their lives over which they have little or no control, from the effects of their own and others' sin. Such a spirituality would not see suffering as something to be avoided (as our culture does), but as a Calvary road which can lead to a renewal of human life. We would be interested in staying with people in their suffering and help them find their way through it, either in terms of integrating its reality into their lives, or by transforming their circumstances to achieve a genuine liberation.

Our motive is this: the Blood shed on the cross reminds us that suffering is real and usually unjust, but also that it need not prevail. The Blood is the source of strength to endure, but also the sign of ultimate hope, that no suffering need be forever. A ministry of the cross means that we confront the suffering, the death, the contradictions of our lives, but with the confidence that there is a larger reality which can redeem us.

I would suggest that we explore situations in our ministry which address problems of suffering. Gaspar himself died caring for the sick during a plague. He followed the Pope into exile and was a great comfort to him in his suffering. We, too, address the problems of suffering in our ministries: among those who are sick in body and spirit, or who suffer the effects of their years; those who are disabled; those who are oppressed because of race, ethnic group, or whatever reason.

The ministry of the **chalice** brings together the two previous images in a special way. When related to the covenant, it celebrates the life given us by the New Covenant in Christ's Blood. When related to the cross, it becomes the biblical cup of suffering which Jesus saw in the Garden of Gethsemane, the cup of suffering which is offered to the disciples. When raised up in the Eucharist and partaken of by those present, it is an invitation to remember and witness to suffering as well as to the hope for glory and communion. As the apocalyptic cup of wrath, it will be poured out in judgment upon the unjust.

The Blood is, of course, the reason the cup becomes a symbol. It is at once the force of life and of death. The cup raised up is a witness to those realities; the cup shared marks our participation in them. It is a sign of not forgetting the pain of the past; it is a sign of the remembrance and hope to which we are called; it is the sign of vindication for those who now suffer.

What would a ministry of the chalice mean for our mission as the Society of the Precious Blood? If we see the ministry of the chalice as central to what we do, then our special focus and contribution to the mission of the Church would center upon our solidarity with the people we serve and work with: solidarity in their sufferings and in their hope. In this, our ministry of the chalice comes not only through divine ordination or institution, but also through this solidarity. We raise up the chalice not only through divine empowerment, but because we can gather and announce the sufferings and hopes of the community we lead. We offer the chalice in communion not only as priests or ministers of communion, but also because we, too, drink of the same cup of suffering and salvation. The ministry of the chalice is a ministry of justice, the ministry of Him who was crushed yet arose.

Our motive is this: the Bloodshedding of Christ shows Our Lord in his complete identification with the extremes of human experience. The chalice becomes the ritual way of remembering and not forgetting, of catching the paradox of crushed grapes that ferment to a new reality, of sharing together to ease the burden of life and to share out its joys.

I would suggest that we explore situations in our ministry which address problems of solidarity. What does that mean in terms of our own commitment to the option for the poor, as well as ministry to the not-so-poor? Are we noted for understanding what is happening to our people: the unemployed, the young, the parents of the young, those who suffer? How complete is our mandate to raise the chalice, to share the cup in the community we serve?

Let me say just a few things in conclusion. There are many other biblical images which could inform an apostolic spirituality of the Blood of Christ: the Lamb, the High Priest, the Suffering Servant, the Vine and the Branches, the Winepress. These three, however, the covenant, the cross, the chalice, are for me the most compelling and, I believe, the most challenging for our spirituality as a community. Others may be added and are of course not excluded. But we have to start somewhere, and we need to commit ourselves somewhere.

Second, you may have noticed that in talking about ministries we should undertake as distinctively C.P.P.S. I did not engage in sorting through which apostolates we shall keep and which we shall do away with. In my own reflections, I think this is the wrong way to go about spirituality and development of mission for our own Society. I emphasized, rather, certain *qualities* which are trademarks of our work: community-building and enhancement of communication, commitment to those who suffer, solidarity in the suffering and hopes of those whom we serve. I did not say that on this basis we should, for example, keep parishes, but drop military chaplaincies; or keep hospitals, but drop prisons; or keep retreat centers, but drop schools. Those qualities I have outlined as our trademarks can wither or flourish in any of those settings. We may have to evaluate in certain instances whether this or that place should be kept; and we may find certain apostolates to be inconsonant with a spirituality of covenant, cross and chalice. But we should concentrate more on the spirituality which binds us together, both in how we work and how we treat each other, and then discern particulars of our mission in that context. Some of the latter will have to be done, but it should be out of our spirituality rather than some other criteria.

And a final point. To know our spirituality is to know a lot about our identity. If we are attuned to a spirituality which, internally, is marked by the bond of charity, by hospitality, concern for one another (and especially the ill, the wounded, the elderly of our Society); and, externally, by our commitments to community-building and renewal of communication, to the suffering, and to justice, then we are making our unique mark within the ministry of the Church. This is not the full range of Christian virtue or ministry; nor does it encompass every apostolate. Yet it is valid, necessary, and of great service.

But to speak of justice or communication or solidarity is to engage in fairly abstract language. The real stuff of our spirituality is in our stories which cluster around those images of covenant, cross, and chalice. There our spirituality of the Blood of Christ is to be found. There it is poured out, lifted up, and shared.

*(Fr. Robert Schreiter, C.P.P.S., Cincinnati C.P.P.S. Newsletter, July 1, 1985, pp. 1658-1659)*