

Communicating the Message of the Precious Blood

In the Light of Jesus, the Preacher

By Barry Fischer, CPPS

Introduction

In this presentation I would like to take a look at Jesus, as Preacher. I am not a biblical scholar nor a trained theologian. My observations come from my own experience of meditating on the Word of God and as one who has spent all but forty years preaching that Word.

The focus of the first part of this presentation is basically an effort on my part to answer these three questions: What did Jesus preach? How did He preach? Whom did He preach to?

Then in the second part, I try to apply some of this to our mission of communicating the message of the Blood of Christ in our varied apostolates. In other words, what can we learn from Jesus?

PART ONE: Jesus, the Preacher

I. What did Jesus preach?

The Word was made Flesh (John 1,1-18)

In the Prologue of John's Gospel we read, "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." John proclaims our belief in the fundamental truth of the Incarnation. It is here where any reflection on preaching the Word of God must begin.

Jesus, or better yet, the "Jesus Event", reveals to us the face and the heart and the mind of God. Jesus' whole life speaks to us of God. His teaching, his miracles, his way of interacting with others, his gestures, all speak to us of God. All of it comprises revelation. Taken all together it is the Word God has spoken to us.

The entirety of His life speaks a word about God's love. Love is not just what God speaks or a deed God does, but it is Who God is! "*Deus caritas est*" (1 John 4:8). Benedict XVI states that Jesus reveals to us the compassionate face of God and that the most radical expression of God's love for us is the Cross.

It is important to note not just what God has revealed to us in Jesus, but **how** that revelation takes place. This revelation takes place *in history and not outside it*. The post Synod Apostolic Exhortation, **Verbum Domini**, reminds us of this when it states: "*God does not reveal himself to*

men in the abstract, but he assumes the languages, the images and the expressions bound to the diverse cultures.” (#109). Again in #114, it also affirms, “The mystery of the incarnation reminds us that God, on His side, always communicates Himself in a concrete story, taking up the cultural codes written in that history, but, on the other hand, the very Word can and should be transmitted in different cultures, transforming them from within, through what Pope Paul VI called, the evangelization of cultures.”

Jesus communicated what He heard from the Father

Before examining briefly some of the characteristics of Jesus’ preaching, it is important to emphasize the source of his preaching. On different occasions Jesus mentioned that he was communicating what he had heard from the Father.

In John’s gospel in one of the dialogues with the Jews following the episode of a woman caught in adultery, in reply to a question put before him “Who are you?” Jesus said: *“What I told you from the beginning. But the one who sent me is true, and what I heard from him I tell the world.” And then, “The one who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, because I always do what is pleasing to him” (8:25-30).*

On other occasions Jesus declared the same truth: John 7,16; 16,13; 14,26; 15,26

To say it succinctly, Jesus’ intimate communication with the Father is the wellspring from which his preaching is nourished.

Jesus announced the Good News

The content of Jesus’ preaching was the **Good News** that the Reign of God was among them. He **announced** the Good News of God’s redeeming Love. Jesus reveals through His words and deeds the dream God has for humanity.

He does not moralize, he does not reprimand (except the Pharisees because of their hypocrisy). He releases in the listener a liberating force which is capable of moving the person from where he/she is, to discover how they could be, as they strive to reach their full potential. A good example of this is the encounter of Zacchaeus and Jesus who lunched together, to the surprise of everyone (cfr. Luke 19:1-10).

People were first touched by Jesus’ love which was unconditional and abundant. He didn’t throw their sins into their face and demand conversion so that He would then love them. Love and acceptance was a gift! It would then be the acceptance of that gift which would call the person to want to respond.

Jesus came to reveal God's love and to realize God's design for all humankind: the Reign of God in which the reigning law was one of Love and fellowship. Mt 4,23; 9,35; 24,14; Mk 1, 14-15; Lk 4,43; 8,1; 16:16-17

But Jesus was not just a crowd pleaser trying to please his audience. He spoke the Truth even when that truth was challenging. A clear example of this is His "Bread of Life Discourse" in John's gospel in which he states and then restates the need to "eat His flesh and drink His blood" if we are to have eternal life (cfr. John 6:22-71).

In the tradition of the prophets, on the one hand he **announced** the coming of the Reign of God, and on the other hand he **denounced** all that would impede that coming. He spoke the Truth even at the risk of losing some of his followers. And he would eventually pay the price for speaking the truth, with his own death.

II. How did Jesus preach?

Jesus spoke in the language of the people

Jesus is one of us and shares our humanity. Particularly important to us, I believe, is his way of relating to the people, with those suffering for whatever reason, with those nearby and those far away, with sinners and just ones, with the great and the small, with the poor and the rich, whether at home or on the road.

Mark says in chapter 4 of his Gospel, *"With many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to understand it. Without parables he did not speak to them, but to his own disciples he explained everything in private"* (v. 26-34)

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep and the sheep know his voice. Jesus was a man in tune with his culture. He spoke to the people, using their language and images which reflected realities they could relate to, like fishing or farming or tending the sheep, or speaking as a young man in the Temple with the Scribes and Pharisees (Lk. 2:46-49). The Gospels provide abundant evidence of this.

Liana Marabini, who is one of the keepers of the cultural goods of the Vatican and a personal friend, wrote once in a journal of the Pontifical Council of Culture of the Vatican, *"The fascination of Jesus lies in his ability to listen, which is a real act of love towards his contemporaries. An attentive listening to the neighbor gives him the possibility to find the appropriate responses to the wounds of each soul, to conceive proper solutions for the most difficult situations, to do the right things. Jesus is the greatest communicator of all times because he transmits through words, gestures, deeds and miracle, a timeless value: love"* (Cultures and Faith, Vol. XVII, 2009, N.3-4, p. 215, Civitas Vaticana).

Jesus spoke with authority

The biblical word is **both word and deed**: *“God says what he does and does what he says”*. In the book of Genesis we read, *“God said, ‘Let there be light’, and there was light”* (Gen 1:3)

Jesus communicated simply and with clarity what He heard from the Father, but his communication was not limited to moments of specific preaching. His Words were backed up with Deeds. The Gospels are full of miracle stories in which Jesus expresses in deeds the love He has come to reveal. No one can call Jesus a hypocrite! To the contrary, the miracles he worked would give birth in those who observed him words like: *“Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”* And, *“Jesus did not preach as the scribes and the Pharisees, but he lived what he preached.”*

Jesus read the signs of the times in light of the Scriptures

During the Easter Season we have read and meditated on the wonderful story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus following the events that had rocked Jerusalem in previous days. We know the story well (cfr. Luke 24).

The disciples, downcast and disappointed, at what they felt at the moment as the end of the wonderful dream they had lived when Jesus walked among them, were on their way back home apparently to take up where they had left off, when Jesus had called them to follow him.

While on that journey Jesus appeared and walked with them and entered into a dialogue about what had happened in Jerusalem. Through reflecting with them on the Scriptures he helped them to understand the deeper meaning of what was going on. And finally, having accepted their invitation to stay with them for the night, when he broke bread with them at table, their eyes were opened and they recognized in the one who until now was but a stranger, the Risen Lord!

What strikes me here, is how Jesus “read the signs of the times” with the disciples in light of the Sacred Scriptures, and their eyes were opened and they came to an understanding and discovered a deeper meaning in the events they had previously experienced.

III. To whom did Jesus preach?

Jesus met the people where they were

Jesus takes up a dialogue with the Samaritan woman at the well. He begins the dialogue, accepting her where she is in order to progressively help her discover the truth about herself. He engages her in a constructive dialogue through which she herself would discover what is happening to her, what were her deepest desires.

As in many situations, Jesus communicates with people where they are, in their concrete situations, whether that be with regard their social status, responding to a particular need (Matthew 15:32-39, feeding the hungry), or to a cry for help (cfr. Matthew 20:29-34, the healing of the two blind men).

Jesus crossed frontiers to reach out to those in need

The law of Incarnation tell us that **Jesus**, in his humanness, **grew “in wisdom, age, and grace”** and **his understanding of mission also developed as a process**. We discover several passages of the New Testament in which we see Jesus being challenged and stretched in his understanding of ministry. And in a very macho society, it was women who often called him to expand his mentality and understanding!

As we look at the life of Jesus the Missionary we discover that in His world the **unexpected questions of the most unlikely people** became occasions for Him to marvel at the workings of grace and of a faith which comes from God and which resulted in miracles beyond himself. This was the case, for example, with **the Canaanite woman in Mark 7:24-30**:

“From that place he went off to the district of Tyre. He entered a house and wanted no one to know about it, but he could not escape notice. Soon a woman whose daughter had an unclean spirit heard about him. She came and fell at his feet.

The woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth, and she begged him to drive the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, “Let the children be fed first. For it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.” She replied and said to him, “Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s scraps.” Then he said to her, “For saying this, you may go. The demon has gone out of your daughter.” When the woman went home, she found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.”

The insistence and great faith of this woman invoked Jesus to respond with the cure of her daughter! Jesus was stretched by his encounter with the Canaanite woman and through that encounter broadened his understanding of His mission!

Jesus was stretched in the vision of his ministry and understanding of it. His encounters with very real human persons, even those from other faiths or cultures, invited Him to a kind of “conversion” and to a “different viewpoint”. Jesus grew in his self-understanding and in his understanding of his Mission.

PART TWO: How does this apply to how we communicate the Gospel of the Precious Blood?

An incarnational spirituality

I have often said that a spirituality of the Blood of Jesus is a very concrete one. It is tangible. It connects with realities which we experience each day in our lives and ministry. It speaks to the world in which we live, since it offers a way of responding to our deepest yearnings and struggles.

In order to communicate our spirituality we need to be doubly rooted: in the Word of God and in reality.

Steeped in the Word of God

As Jesus communicated the Word he received from the Father, we do not announce our own word, but The Word which we have received in our hearts and incarnated in our lives, through our personal and communal reflection on God's Word as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Pope Benedict XVI in *Deus Caritas Est*, reminds us that *"Words are, above all, a vehicle of communication, of mutual self-giving. For Christians, the Word is not in the end a choice or an idea but an encounter with a Person."*

Thus what we wish to communicate must flow from our own personal encounter with Christ, the Word made flesh, in our own life.

Like all other Christians we are called to proclaim the message of God's love through word and deed. But as "peoples of the Blood of Christ" we have been entrusted through our congregational charism approved and recognized by the Church, the mystery of the Precious Blood. We have a treasure to be shared for the enrichment of all.

It is sometimes said that the Social Doctrine of the Church is the Church's best kept secret. I would venture to say that the "spirituality of the Blood of Christ" is perhaps our best kept secret as well. It is time to break open that mystery and to reveal its riches!

To do so, we also need to be steeped in those Scriptural texts which speak directly or indirectly of the Blood of Christ. It is not for me to do here, but I simply recall in general those themes which are central to our spirituality: the covenant, reconciliation, the Eucharis (the Cup), human dignity, justice and peace, redemptive suffering, solidarity and hope.

Knowledge of the people we walk with and with their reality

The Anglican Bishop, Thomas Wright, puts it this way: *“The word of God is a shared word. If a language is not shared by speaker and hearer it cannot communicate. Language is required for the human and social interaction that is at the root of culture.”* And, *“The word of God has to speak in two cultures – the culture of the Church and the culture of the world. It must find ways of speaking in settings where the fundamental reality of divine revelation is not recognized. We must become bilingual, speaking in the word’s “native language” of faith and also in the common language of humanity.”*

In the post Synod Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*, it states that the Synod Assembly exhorted us to always have before us the questions: *“What do the readings say? What do they say to me personally? What should I say to the community, keeping in mind their concrete situation?”* (# 59)

Although the Synod Fathers were speaking about preaching the Word in general, these are good questions for us to ask when we seek to discover how to communicate the message of the Blood of Christ. We begin with the texts themselves, then we ask what these say to me personally, and then how do these texts speak to the concrete situations in which we live.

Or, the opposite can also be true. We begin with the situation in which our audience finds itself, since the proclamation is proposed as an answer to a question, a question which is born from the situation the person or a determined group is living.

There is always a search for meaning in every experience we are confronting. To draw this search out is a necessary condition so as to make space for the Word which is proclaimed. If this is not done, then the Word comes off as far off, strange, even foreign to the ones hearing it.

Thus, the proclamation of the message of the Precious Blood does not ever take on an identical face, but rather responds according to the situation and the diversity of the audience.

For example, a key element of Precious Blood spirituality is “reconciliation.” The situation which calls forth the response of the Blood of Christ can vary greatly. If we are living in a post-dictatorial country following a bloody coup and political oppression, we speak of reconciliation in one way; if we are working with a group of married couples who are in need of building bridges of dialogue or of repairing relationships and of renewing their covenant bond, we announce other aspects of the blood of reconciliation and covenant. And so we could speak with other elements essential to our spirituality.

If the Word of God is to touch people’s lives and help them find meaning in what they are experiencing, then we need to find ways to express and to announce the message which speaks to that particular situation. Once again, we recall that our spirituality is a very concrete one.

And it is one which speaks to the diverse situations and responds to the search for meaning in our everyday life experiences.

Communicating the message of the Blood of Christ on the one hand, responds to a given situation, need, search for meaning, and on the other, the proclamation itself can help the receiver to ask the right questions and to formulate a search which was not there before, or which was not immediately conscious or obvious.

In a language that is understood

The Letter to the Hebrews states that *“In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe.”* (1:1)

God has spoken and continues to speak to peoples of all times using the language of the time, with the mentality of the time, and addressing the problems of that time.

We need to adopt God’s method of communicating, as we communicate the message of the Blood of Christ! In my formation as a Missionary, I remember singing so often the old hymns in honor of the Precious Blood, and praying prayers which were part of our devotional material. But often those words sounded foreign to me. I couldn’t relate to them other than in a very abstract and obscure way. The reason is simple: they were composed in an era which had its own language and expressions and responded to historical challenges of the times when they were composed.

We need to discover what language to use today in order to express the richness of our spirituality. Through the challenges of the times in which we live, new aspects may be discovered or reinterpreted for our times. This is in part the purpose of this gathering. We need to tap the resources not only of our theologians, but also of our musicians and poets and artists, as well as our technologically gifted members and lay associates.

People can be scared away from our spirituality at the very mention of blood! We need to discover the meaning behind the Precious Blood and communicates its deepest meaning to the needs of our days and in a language with which we can engage peoples today in dialogue.

A clear personal identity

As communicators of the message of the Blood of Christ, we continually need to nourish our core identity as “Christian men and women entrusted with the spirituality of the Precious Blood.” If we have not developed a personal identity grounded in Christ who shed His Blood for us, how will we communicate the Gospel of the Blood with authenticity?

I once heard a Missionary instruct young seminarians: *"It is important that in each sermon you preach, you mention at least one time the Precious Blood!"* If we are not speaking from the abundance of our hearts, such a mention we make will come off as artificial or academic.

However, when we are steeped in our spirituality and have learned to *"make those connections"* with our everyday reality, then the words will flow naturally and will speak from our own experiences of living the spirituality.

Just as Jesus spoke more to the heart than to the heads of those He encountered, we are called to break open the bread of our own lived experiences of the spirituality in order to enter into dialogue with those with whom we walk.

We do well to recall the words of St. Paul when writing to the Corinthians:

"When I came to you, brothers (and sisters), proclaiming the mystery of God, I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling, and my message and my proclamation were not with persuasive words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of spirit and power, 'so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God'" (1 Cor: 2,1-5)

We share our own life experience and how God has worked miracles in us

In my own experience in preaching, I have discovered time and time again that people connect to stories. I am speaking here of stories about how God has worked in our own life through concrete situations. By breaking open the bread of our own life's journey and showing how God was and is working in that journey, other people can better get in touch with their own life stories and discover how God is working in them.

However, the emphasis should be about what GOD has done, what miracles God has worked in that situation and not self-centered or self-promoting. In a sense our experiences and stories become like modern-day parables which point to God's truth and which mediate God's Word.

I have often spoken of the need to *"make connections"* between our spirituality and our daily lives and commitments. But before we can share how we have made connections, we have to have made them ourselves!

To proclaim the Gospel is not about making a theological exegesis, or proclaiming a doctrine, but rather *communicating an experience*. To live our Christian faith is to *follow Christ*, it is about discipleship. When we announce the Gospel and the message of the Precious Blood, we need to discover how living our spirituality is a way of following Christ as His disciples.

We do the works of the Precious Blood

When we speak of proclaiming and communicating the message of the Precious Blood, we need to remember that the Word is not always proclaimed explicitly. It can also be a Word which is announced through the witness of our life. The questioning and search for meaning I just spoke of, sometimes is sown in another's heart through the witness of our lives which reflects the works of the Precious Blood, such as reconciliation and peace-making, community building, promotion of human dignity, the defense of life from conception to the grave, through being persons of hope and solidarity, by reflecting in our lives the compassionate face of God, etc.

Pope Paul VI spoke of this in his Encyclical Letter, ***Evangelium nuntiandi***:

"Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one. Here we have an initial act of evangelization...Other questions will arise, deeper and more demanding ones, questions evoked by this witness which involves presence, sharing, solidarity, and which is an essential element, and generally the first one, in evangelization." (#21)

He goes on to say, "Nevertheless this always remains insufficient, because even the finest witness will prove ineffective in the long run if it is not explained, justified -- what Peter called always having "your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have" -- and made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus.(#22)

And Blessed John Paul II also spoke of the need for witnesses when he said, that the world today is in more need of witnesses than of teachers. Words simply are not enough. Those words need to be incarnated in concrete actions. As the saying in English goes, "actions often speak louder than words."

We saw that this was so in Jesus' preaching. He spoke with authority, as none other, since the Word he announced was backed up by deeds of compassion and solidarity, reconciliation and liberation. His deeds served to make explicit the content of the Word he proclaimed.

Thus we are challenged constantly to overcome that divide which plagues the lives of many Christians, individually and as communities, that is, the separation between the faith we proclaim and the lives and commitments we live on a daily level. We must always ask ourselves the question: "How am I living and giving witness to the Blood of Christ of which I preach? Am I a peace-builder? Do I affirm the dignity of those with whom I come in contact? How do I

reflect the compassionate face of God? Am I in solidarity with the poor and downtrodden? Do I give of myself (my talents, my time, etc) unselfishly to respond to the needs of others?"

We don't just preach to the choir, but reach out to where the Blood calls us!

Much has been said about responding today to the cry of the blood. In fact, I have often said that if we hear the cry of the blood and let ourselves be questioned and challenged by it, we will be stretched to go beyond the confines of our known and comfortable worlds, just as Jesus was stretched by his encounters with the Others.

Not only are we concerned about responding to the needs and cries of the people in our parish community, catechetical groups, youth groups, confirmation classes, etc but we need to go "outside the circle", "outside the gates of our worlds" to respond to those cries wherever they may be heard. We will be called to a journey of compassion and solidarity.

Bruno Maggioni, an Italian priest, in his book entitled *The priest as a man of the Word*, states that Jesus above all encountered the people along the road and in the villages. He didn't put emphasis on the sacred places, sacred themes, sacred gestures. To the contrary, he shifted the attention from the sacred gestures to *relationships*, from the sanctuary to *His Body*, from the temple of stone to *the community*, from the sacred to *life*, from the great buildings (Mk 13) to *the least of our brothers and sisters* (Mt 25).

The Reign of God which was at the heart of Jesus' teaching was one in which all would be invited to sit at the banquet table. Jesus himself proclaimed that when He would be raised up from the earth, He would attract all to Himself. The Reign of God is missionary by its very essence.

Jesus had a soft spot in His heart for the poor, the downtrodden, the needy, those searching for meaning in their lives, those far off. How are we reaching out to them? Do we place a welcome mat of hospitality at the door of our heart? Of our community house? Of our parish or school?

We need to ask ourselves, where would Gaspar be preaching today? Where would Maria De Mattias and Maria Anna Brunner commit themselves in our society in these days? What are those new "areopaghi" (The internet? In the shopping malls? In bars?) What are the modern means for communicating the message of the redeeming Blood of Christ today? How are we using those means?

With our eyes fixed on Jesus!

We will only be able to fulfill our call to evangelize and to announce the message of Christ's precious Blood if we put ourselves before Christ, the Word of God made flesh. We need to respond to the exhortation of our saints to "go often before the Crucifix and to read the book of the Cross."

In that book we discover what Pope Benedict has called the most extreme example of God's love for us. When contemplating His arms outstretched and his Open Heart, we discover our mission to reach out to embrace all peoples in God's love and to create in our own lives, in community, and in our ministry those "safe places" where others can be in an atmosphere of love and respect.

It is a commitment we renew at the Eucharistic Table as we drink from the communion Cup. We renew there our covenant commitment with God and with one another, and we are sent forth to live what we have celebrated, to be that living Word of God's love, messengers of Christ's redeeming love for all.

We beg the intercession of St. Gaspar as we begin our week of sharing and reflecting: *"Help us to discern how we are to live and promote the message of the Gospel. United with you, may our hearts have compassion for the poor, the oppressed, and the abandoned. Increase our love for the Blood of Christ, so that we also may be prepared to risk our lives. We thank God for your good works and example. Give us strength in our weakness so that we may grow stronger in our vocation to the honor of God and the salvation of all. Amen.*

Questions for discussion:

1. What other characteristics of the preaching of Jesus would you add?
2. Which of the aspects noted in the conference, do you find most challenging? Why?
3. What frontiers are you challenged to cross, in order to respond to the call of the Blood?
4. What is your favorite Scripture text on the Blood of Christ? Why does this text speak to you so forcefully?
5. What symbols of Precious Blood Spirituality most speak to you in your cultural context. Why?