

## ***The Challenge of Living our Charism Today***

### **Introduction**

This course was deemed necessary by our Major Superiors in order to study and reflect on the life of our founder, on our charism, our history and on our Normative Texts. Hopefully, the many reflections shared during our weeks together have helped to deepen our understanding of our CPPS patrimony leading to a clearer vision of **our own identity**, around which it is easier to build communion.

Even St. Gaspar in his days seems to have been preoccupied with the theme of identity. In his Circular Letter # 12 on the occasion of the annual retreat he addresses this issue when he writes: “Each one then should live according to the spirit of the Institute. It is heard said: I like the spirit of the Cistercians, others, I like the spirit of the Jesuits, etc. They do it this way or that. Nonsense! Then you should become Cistercians or Jesuits and not come into this Congregation! You did not become a Cistercian nor a Jesuit; and you aren’t really of the Congregation of the Most Precious Blood either because you don’t have her spirit. Who are you then?”

The Document *Fraternal Life in Community* reminds us that “an essential element of the unity of a religious community is ‘reference to the institute’s founder and to the charism lived by him or her and then communicated, kept and developed throughout the life of the institute’ ” (#45).

We are at a decisive crossroads in our history. We will continue as a vital force within our Church and in society, in the measure with which we are capable of recapturing the founding spirit of St. Gaspar and incarnate that spirit in the diversity of cultures and in the changing social realities in which we live. The deepening of our CPPS identity is calling us to new life and to new hope.

### **Centered in Christ**

As has been affirmed on different occasions during this course, Christ is the unmistakable center of religious life. He calls and gathers us into community. It is He who shares His mission with us. He becomes our model, our way and our goal. All that we are and do rests upon this vital relationship and a constant reference to Jesus, the One sent by God, the first missionary. Upon Him we build our house. He is the spring from which our identity flows. Our lives need to be rooted in Christ, imbued with the Gospel values and on fire for the Reign of God.

When speaking on the importance of being rooted in Christ, *Vita Consecrata* states that “In every charism there predominates ‘a profound desire to be conformed to Christ and to give witness to some aspect of his mystery.’ Our identity, then, is to be found in the particular aspect of the person and life of Jesus Christ that we put into relief, in a special way, in the Church. In other words, each Congregation approved by the Church is called upon to shed some light on the complex mystery of the person and mission of Jesus Christ. Understood within the universal mission of the Church, we make our specific contribution to that mission through the living of our charism in faithful fidelity. There is no doubt that we, as Missionaries of the Precious Blood are called to witness to the “price of our Redemption.”

### **The Rule**

This specific aspect is meant to take shape and develop according to the most authentic tradition of the institute, as present in its rule, constitutions and statutes. Thus *Vita Consecrata* affirms that,

“there is a pressing need today for every institute *to return to the rule*, since the rule and constitutions provide a map for the whole journey of discipleship, in accordance with a specific charism confirmed by the Church. A greater regard for the rule will not fail to offer consecrated persons a reliable criterion in their search for the appropriate forms of a witness which is capable of responding to the needs of the times without departing from an institute’s initial inspiration.” (VC #37)

Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, OP, the former Master General of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans) observed when speaking on Religious Vocations to the Assembly of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men in Arlington, VA (August 8, 1996): “Our identity as religious lies in giving up the identities commonly understood in our society. In this human desert which is the global marketplace, we need to build a context in which religious can actually flourish and be vital invitations to walk in the way of the Lord. What a particular religious order or congregation does is to offer such a context. Each congregation offers a different ecological niche for a strange way of being a human being. A religious order is like an environment. Building religious life is like making a nature reserve on an old building site.” He then asks an important question for us and one particularly adapt for this group of formators: “What do our brothers and sisters need to flourish on that journey as they leave behind career, wealth, status and the assurance of a single partner? What do we need to make that hard pilgrimage from novitiate to grave?”

Our Normative Texts provide us with that map for journeying “along the road marked by blood.”

## The Three Pillars

When speaking of our identity today we commonly speak of the three pillars of our Congregation; namely, **mission, community, and spirituality**. During these weeks we have examined from different perspectives these three constituent characteristics of the CPPS. Our Normative Texts of 1988, are organized primarily around these three pillars.

- Title One: Community Life (C6-C20)
- Title Two: The Apostolate (C21-27)

The third pillar, spirituality, while not mentioned under a separate Title in our texts, is clearly the “red thread” which runs through their entirety and becomes the bond that holds it all together.

C4 (Fundamental Principles) “**Devotion to the Precious Blood** – the mystery of Christ who gives his Blood for the salvation of all – holds a special place in the spiritual, community and apostolic life of the members.”

C6 (Community Life) “Whereas all the people of God are **made one in the Blood of the New Covenant**, our Society gives living testimony of this special unity through its community life according to the spirit of St. Gaspar.”

C21 (The Apostolate) “The Society takes part in the apostolic mission of the Church, proclaiming the mystery of Christ who has **redeemed all human beings in his Blood** to make them sharers in the Kingdom of God.”

C28 (Formation and Incorporation) “Called to be sharers of the mission of Christ in the world, the members of our Society, inspired by and living consciously within the **mystery of the**

**Precious Blood**, exert themselves continually to attain that conformation to him – human, Christian, communitarian, apostolic – that best promotes the Kingdom of God.”

C45 (Government) “Our Society is a fellowship of men **freed through the Blood of Christ** and united in the bond of love. As brothers the members work together to create a community in which each of them can respond in full freedom to the call of Christ.”

The centrality of the spirituality of the Blood of Christ in our identity is highlighted in the introduction to the *Profile of the CPPS Missionary* when it states in the opening paragraph: “Our mission and our community life are **sustained and directed by the spirituality of the Precious Blood.**”

These three pillars need also to be placed within the framework of being a **Society of Apostolic Life**. Our Normative Texts when outlining the Fundamental Principles of our Constitutions begins by stating: “The Society of the Precious Blood is a Society of the Apostolic Life of pontifical right with its own Constitution and Statutes.” (C2) Fr. Bob Schreiter outlined for us the key components of a SAL according to the Code of Canon Law (1983). Yesterday, Fr. Mario Brotini walked us through the history of our Congregation from the juridical point of view helping us to understand within the context of the development of Canon Law, how we have come to be defined as a SAL. These are reflections which add an important element to our reflection on CPPS Identity. It has been until very recently a largely unexplored area in our Congregation.

The new Code of Canon Law has found a way of speaking about our type of Congregation (CIC 731,1). In our formation programs it becomes important that we use this category to define ourselves, avoiding the confusion of the past when we would hear confreres saying, “we are just diocesan priests living in community” or others who would go the other way, identifying us in practice with “religious”. Some of this confusion we have experienced in the past reflects the confusion of the Church herself in trying to identify our type of Congregation, as Fr. Bob has pointed out in his presentation. While perhaps not a perfect definition and one which is still in development, we can certainly see ourselves reflected in this category as described in the Code of 1983. One would be hard put to try to describe better what Gaspar envisioned our Community to be.

I would like to reflect briefly upon the three pillars which together configure the charism of our institute of apostolic life: our mission, community life, and the spirituality of the Precious Blood. I will do so in the following way. First, I will sketch the historical expression in each category; then a word about our present-day reality; and thirdly, will try to indicate some of the challenges our present-day situation poses to us.

### **Apostolate**

**Historically:** In the beginning our principal ministry was that of preaching **missions and retreats**. St. Gaspar saw these as the two means for renewal and reform which were most suited to the needs of the times in the Papal States after the fall of Napoleon. The intended reform was aimed both at the People of God in general and at the clergy. St. Gaspar responded to a direct invitation of Pope Pius VII in 1815 to be an apostolic missionary in the Papal States. In a letter to Pope Leo XII in 1825, St. Gaspar wrote: “*The holy missions and retreats, as well as other pious works, which are currently being accomplished by the Society, are surely the principle basis for the reform.*” And in another letter to the same Pope he writes “*that in these foundations, already put into motion by the now deceased Supreme Pontiff Pope Pius VII, the clergy find a haven and the longed for*

*reform of the clergy itself is promoted so that they can become a beacon of holiness for the people.”* St. Gaspar was very clear in stating that we were not to accept parishes, since they demand stability and a more permanent residence which would seem to contradict our missionary nature. As we have seen in several presentations, this was clearly indicated in the first expressions of our Rule.

**Present Reality:** Over the years as the Society grew and we expanded into areas outside of the Papal States, the missionaries had to respond to different needs and challenges. Gradually, our apostolic activities were broadened. Today our 530 CPPS priests and brothers minister in nineteen countries. Our apostolic activities today include parish ministry, the educational apostolate, hospital and military chaplaincies, the foreign missions, and the preaching of missions and retreats, even though the latter is no longer our principle apostolate. And, as we face the needs of society today, some of our members are seeking to be freed from our “traditional apostolates” in order to respond to the more pressing needs of today’s world, and to the cries of the blood of persons living with AIDS and HIV, the incarcerated, with victims of violence, and in efforts to reconcile and build relationships in a fragmented society, to name a few examples.

**Challenges:** When we were founded, we had a focused apostolate in which our missionaries, through the preaching of retreats and missions, sought to bring about the reform of the church. Today, in the midst of wide diversity in our apostolic commitments, what is our specific contribution to the Church’s mission? What gives us unity amidst all of our diversity? How can we respond in new and creative ways to “the call of the Blood” in the diverse cultural, social, and ecclesial situations in which we find ourselves? Are we free to “let go” of certain commitments of the past, in order to embrace the challenges of the present times? How can we recuperate our sense of being missionary while exercising ministry in parishes, in the educational apostolate etc., with their demands of stability? As Missionaries dedicated to the preaching of the Word, how can we respond to the call to “new evangelization” as we face the demands of the third millennium? And how do we deal with the tensions which arise from attempting to respect the demands of our present commitments, while responding in new and creative ways to the signs of the times in which we live and with diminishing personnel? How do we respond to the needs and demands of ministry in new cultural contexts where the CPPS is developing?

### **Community Life**

**Historically:** Community life was an essential element in the dream of St. Gaspar. He wished to join the apostolic missionaries together in what he called “**Mission Houses**” where they could regroup in order to pray and reflect together, study and rest, in order to once again go out and to engage in the preaching of popular missions and retreats. These Mission Houses were not connected to any parish church but were nevertheless centers of pastoral activity. In them spiritual and theological conferences and spiritual retreats were offered for the clergy and the laity in a type of ongoing mission. The Mission Houses were much more than mere residences, but actually formed part of their apostolic service for the reform of the church.

Moreover, the missionaries were not joined by any vows, but only by the “**bond of charity**”. This is clearly expressed in Article 3 of our first approved Rule: “*They (the missionaries) are bound to the Society by the bonds of charity alone and not by any vow.*”

**Present Reality:** Today as a result of the diversification of our apostolic activities, our missionaries more often than not live in very small communities. In fact, any number of them in some countries live alone and at times at great distances from another member of the Congregation. But in newer segments of the Society, the tendency is once again to come together for more community life. The idea of the “Mission House” is resurfacing and some interesting

experiences are being lived today. Some of our Provinces are beginning to “cluster” our members in geographical regions in order to facilitate contact among them.

**Challenges:** What might a modern-day version of the Mission House look like today? How can it be a viable model in which to live community in a particular house, with members having different apostolates and with different schedules? What form does community life take in such a situation? What happens to community prayer? What does “community life” mean for us when we are a community whose principle reason for coming together is mission? How can we live a truly enriching community life in such circumstances, without the Mission House simply becoming a hotel and a place to sleep and to get a hot meal? And, how can we live the “bond” of charity which calls us to seek ways to connect and bond with each other? How can people who live alone or at distances from others be “connected” to other brothers in the bond of charity?

Another challenge we face today is that of living in increasingly multicultural and international communities. How to build unity in diversity? In a world where all sorts of boundaries are becoming more and more elastic, and where new walls keep springing up both inside and outside the heart of people, testimony to the Blood of the Covenant and of Reconciliation is urgently needed. How can we forge communities with the ability to absorb the diversity which will increasingly characterize us, our Church, and society? What is the prophetic witness which we are called to give? How can we become a *living sign* of that “beautiful order of things established in the Blood of Christ”?

As important as community is for us, it cannot constitute our principle aim, as it is at the service of the mission that God has confided to us through St. Gaspar and his successors. We do not exist in order to maintain structures and works, but rather to evangelize, to announce the Good News, to free and to heal, and to reveal God’s love and compassion. Mission is our goal.

When we center too much on ourselves, on our structures, on our search for security, on our own welfare and future, we can become cold or indifferent to the sufferings of those outside our walls. When we spend our energies arguing among ourselves and become obsessed with little things, we become asphyxiated and begin to lose the perspective of the larger picture.

### **Spirituality**

**Historically:** The Ministry of the Word which is at the heart of our Society found its motivation in the devotion to the Precious Blood, as an expression of God’s redeeming love, which offered pardon to sinners and called forth a response in conversion and renewal. The missionaries established “Confraternities of the Precious Blood” in order to promote devotion to the Price of our Redemption among the laity. For St. Gaspar and his band of missionaries the spreading this devotion was a natural part of their ministry. St. Gaspar wrote in a letter to Fr. Gaetano Bonanni in 1815, that “*The Evangelical Workers labor so that the Blood of Jesus will be applied to the salvation of souls, and this they must offer continually, asking for pardon for sinners; if other institutes assume the charge of propagating the one or the other devotion, this one of the missions must be intent on the propagation of that devotion which incorporates all the others, that of the price of our redemption.*”

**Present Reality:** Devotions, which are born in a concrete historical situation and which are a response to the needs of a given culture and ecclesial situation, little-by-little can become disengaged from history and lose their significance. Gradually, as the Society moved into new cultural and social situations and needed to respond to different challenges, the devotion became estranged from reality and often resulted in merely “pious practices” and “prayers to be recited”.

Often disconnected from our everyday lives we no longer find in them a motivation for our life and mission. Fortunately during the past twenty years our Congregation has been going through a process of rediscovering the spirituality of the Precious Blood by re-examining its biblical roots and finding in the spirituality a way of life and a way of focusing our apostolate. This spirituality has become the source of deep renewal within our Society and we are re-examining our mission in its light. Once again it has sparked the fires and zeal for mission in our members.

**Challenges:** The greatest challenge for many of the older members has been to go from the concept of a “devotion” to the Precious Blood, to developing a “spirituality” of the Blood of Christ, which becomes the driving force for our life in community and which gives direction to our mission. How does the spirituality of the Precious Blood express itself in different cultures and in new areas? How does it inform our everyday life and apostolates? The question of how we respond to the “call of the Blood” in a given place and time, is becoming a dynamic way to focus our mission.

Spirituality by its nature must be communicated, it cannot remain silent and unexpressed. It is not made to be kept and protected as a sort of personal treasure. It is a gift from on high which, like all gifts of God, is destined not for the single individual or the single institution, but for the Church, for the whole world. Thus a spirituality has to be communicable, expressed in simple words understandable by all. It must be translated into simple language, that spoken by simple people, by the poor, for whom our first gift and service is. We face the challenge of translation of our spiritual wealth into local languages and dialects. People today still need devotions. We need devotions. But they also must be reflected in today’s language and in our present cultural and historical context. A particular challenge for us is to create, from our lived experience of the spirituality of the Blood of Christ, new prayers and songs which speak to people’s present-day experiences and which respond to their needs. We have experienced some of these new expressions during our Course.

Fr. Amedeo Cencini, FDCC, an Italian theologian, once said when speaking of religious life, “If the gift stays in our hands it will wear out, will lose warmth and color, weaken and continue only to repeat itself. Then we will become the curators of the museum and the face of religious life will grow old and wrinkled. It will no longer have anything to say because it will have moved outside the relationship, and it is well known that words spring from relationships.”

Devotional practices, hymns and prayers, have always played an important role in maintaining and promoting our spirituality, as we have seen from the beginnings when Francesco Albertini composed some of the prayers we still use today! We must not underestimate their enduring power to communicate our spirituality.

Another important development which we are experiencing in our Society is the interest which many lay people have expressed in the spirituality of the Precious Blood. As we have seen, sharing the spirituality with the laity has been an important part of our mission from the very beginning. Today a whole movement of lay participation and companionship is emerging and is giving new life to our incorporated members around the globe. As we share our spirituality with lay women and men, we are enriched by their perspectives and are being called to renew ourselves. Along with this process, we are also asking questions about possible new forms of living community, in which lay women and men companions/associates can share more closely with us our spirituality and ministry.

Here I would speak of one of the dangers to the identity of religious congregations: that which might be called “genericism”. In other words, we sometimes suffer in our communities, parishes,

educational apostolates, and in other ministries from a “generic approach,” that is, one that lacks the specific mediation of our own charism. We simply adopt the guidelines of the particular Church without any effort to see how our charism can enrich or contribute to living out those guidelines; or in order to promote the lay vocation in the Church we so water down our own charism that we fail to offer our witness in religious life as a gift to others, thus weakening our own consecration. In some cultures there might be an excessive accommodation to the demands of family, to the ideals of nations, race or tribe or of some social group, which risks distorting the charism to suit particular positions or interests. And for individual religious who are involved in ecclesial movements, one runs the risk of the ambiguous phenomenon of “dual membership.” While movements are a reality in the life of the Church and seem to be gathering force, we are called to maintain and live our own basic identity as “Missionaries of the Precious Blood.” What happens if a Missionary becomes more identified with a movement (charismatic, focolare, cursillo de cristiandad, etc) than with the CPPS charism? *Fraternal Life in Community* warns that this genericism “reduces religious life to a colorless, lowest common denominator and leads to wiping out the beauty and fruitfulness of the many and various charisms inspired by the Holy Spirit” (#46)

What I have just done is an attempt to describe at least some of the more significant aspects of the context in which we find ourselves today as a Congregation. Formation is not done in a vacuum. The challenges I raise above affect you who are engaged in the ministry of formation in a special way. It is for this changing reality that you need to form our men for life and ministry in the CPPS. What particular challenges does all this pose for your ministry in formation? This is the kind of question we hope you will examine as we near the end of this Course. There are no pat answers. Certainly the answer does not lie in simply “copying” the model of religious life, nor in a return, in a sort of fundamentalist mentality, to reproducing the forms of the past.

## **In Creative Fidelity**

In these changing situations we are called to be faithful to our foundational charism and to our spiritual patrimony. But we are also called to cultivate a dynamic fidelity to our mission in response to new situations and the diverse needs of different places and cultures, in full docility to divine inspiration and to ecclesial discernment.

Attentive to the signs of the times we need to discover how to adapt our mission to the needs which new situations present to us. Our Founder encountered in his time situations of inhumanity which demanded his special attention. He heard the cry of the people and he was moved to compassion. It was the same sorrow and pain that Jesus experienced and like Him, he was moved by the Spirit to look for creative ways to satisfy those needs.

In this context of *creative fidelity to our charism* we are to understand the appeal that the Holy Father made to us in the Audience held with him in Castel Gandolfo on September 14, 2001. He made this bold invitation to the Delegates of our XVII General Assembly: “Two centuries later, another Pope summons the sons of Saint Gaspar to be no less bold in their decisions and actions – to go where others cannot or will not go and to undertake missions which seem to hold little hope of success.” He then also summons us to continue building a civilization of life and to promote the dignity of every human person, especially of the weak and of those deprived of their rightful share of the earth’s abundance. He urged us to pursue a mission of reconciliation.

The Holy Father invites us not to dwell on the past but to live a life in the Spirit that makes the following of Christ fruitful today and helps to prepare for tomorrow. Erich Fromm once wrote: “Being creative means understanding the whole process of life as a continual new birth and never

considering any one phase of life as final.” We hold in ourselves the “memory” of our foundation and try to capture the spiritual force and the creative energies of our founder so as to be able to interpret the signs of our times making possible the necessary new and creative beginnings, new directions and reading of the Gospels.

We are called to appropriate the heart of our Founder and to hear God’s call in the present moment, to see through his eyes with love the world today and its urgent needs, and to commit ourselves to translate into a language for today Gaspar’s message. The preaching of missions and retreats were the most apt means for communicating the message in his times. How might we respond today to the mission of evangelization in our modern world?

We are called to take risks and to situate ourselves on the frontiers, to go “outside the gate” and to plant our cross with those who are suffering, rejected, marginalized. This is where our main concern should be. When we depart from this preferential option of Jesus then our lives and our mission will be less attractive to others. Again, Fr. Cencini says, “An institute that is not open to embrace the new poverties has no right to complain about the crisis of vocations.”

In all of this, the most important thing is to keep alive the fire of the charism which gave birth to our Congregation and, by Gospel choice, to be present in those situations of suffering and misery, prolonging there the love of God which knows no frontiers nor limits. As men involved in the ministry of formation, you have the task of enkindling that fire in our candidates and fanning its flames so that it eventually becomes a fire that consumes and a true passion for mission for building the Reign of God.

### **Starting Afresh from Christ**

This is the title of the most recent Instruction of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, issued in May 2002. The Document states that “the Spirit alone can keep alive the freshness and authenticity of the beginnings while at the same time instilling the courage of interdependence and inventiveness needed to respond to the signs of the times (#20) *Starting afresh from Christ* means “once again finding one’s first love, the inspiring spark which first gave rise to the following. The primacy of love is his. The following is only a response in love to the love of God” (#22). “Consecrated persons cannot be creative, capable of renewing the Institute and opening new pastoral paths if they do not feel loved with this love. It is this love which makes them strong and courageous which instills fire and enables them to dare all” (#22).

Once again we are reminded that being rooted in Christ is the starting point for our following of Christ, for our life in community, and the source of our mission. As Missionaries of the Precious Blood we are called to continually steep ourselves in the Word of God, that Word centered in the Blood of Christ, from which our charism was born. “In continuity with our founder, today we are called to take up the Word of God (=the Gospel of the Blood) and to cherish it in our hearts so that it may be a lamp for our feet and a light for our path” (#24). It was precisely in prayer and meditation on the Word of God under the influence of the Spirit that gave rise to the spark of new life and new works, and the specific re-reading of the Gospel found in our Charism of the Precious Blood.

It is with renewed zeal that we gladly take up the task of evangelization as *servants of the Word*. In the words of *Novo Millennio Ineunte* “we must rekindle in ourselves the impetus of the beginnings and allow ourselves to be filled with the ardour of the apostolic preaching which followed Pentecost” (#40).

We have gathered to drink from the wellsprings of our C.P.P.S. Patrimony. Hopefully our reflections and the sharing of experiences during these weeks have helped us to deepen our own commitment and to renew our vocation as Missionaries of the Blood of Christ. As we contemplate the mystery of our Redemption may we be renewed in our commitment to seek to restore that splendour which was the Creator's intention for humanity from the beginning. And, in the words of the Holy Father, "(to restore) that splendour must be the goal of every plan and project of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood" (Audience at Castel Gandolfo, September 14, 2001).

The celebration of the Eucharist constitutes for us a special moment for deepening our covenant relationship with the Lord and with one another. In it we drink from the wellspring of our spirituality of the Blood of Christ. As we drink from the communion cup the bond of charity is strengthened and we are filled with missionary zeal as we say "yes" to the mission entrusted to us to carry Christ's message of love, reconciliation, covenant, and hope to the farthest corners of our world. Sent by Christ, we venture forth in mission two-by-two, in community, in order to break the bread of our life with our hungry and needy sisters and brothers. It is in the Eucharist where we find our deepest identity and the source of our charism, a charism to be shared for the good of the Church and of society.

As members of a Society of Apostolic Life, the fulfillment of mission is essential in our pursuit of holiness. I close with the words our Founder wrote to one of his missionaries: "In short, we must become all things to all people in order to save all for Christ. Charity does not lie down inactively; it is a flame that never lies still. That is what constitutes sanctity and the perfection of the soul, that is to say, to be totally intent on serving God." (#49)

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Formators Course  
Rome, June 23, 2003