



The Ripples of Grace: A Legacy of Love

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As I prepared to return to school eleven years after ordination, I was surprised when the provincial director of the Cincinnati Province called and asked me to consider being the formation director for both the Cincinnati and Kansas City Provinces at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. I had already been admitted to the Doctor of Ministry program there, and was planning to visit the following week. After my visit, I agreed to accept the appointment. Instead of completing the degree in two years, I was told to take my time and was appointed director of advanced formation for a period of four years. I never expected how that decision would change my life.

The early writing about the spirituality of the Precious Blood had been published while I was serving in parish ministry in Whiting, IN, and Orlando, FL. While I received copies of those early publications, I never got around to reading most of them. However, now that I was a formation director, I decided that I needed to know more about the spirituality that I was tasked with passing on to the candidates in formation. So, I began working my way through the early volumes in the Precious Blood Resource Series.

Earlier this year, my own work on Precious Blood spirituality, *Proclaiming Abundant Love: Biblical Reflections on the Spirituality of the Precious Blood*, was published as the 39th volume in that resource series. Some folks might think of that as my legacy. However, I would see my legacy more personally.

For over twenty years, I serve the congregation as a member of the formation team. First at CTU, from 1993-97. Then as director of vocation ministry from 1998 to 2002. After that, I was asked to step in as director of the Special Formation Summer

Program, from 2002 to 2008. I taught for a semester and served on the formation team in Morogoro, Tanzania, in the fall of 2009. After serving as a pastor for six years, I returned to Chicago as director of advanced formation for another five years. I was formed as much by the candidates in formation during those years as I sought to help form them as future priests and brothers in the community. In looking through the community directory, I counted twenty members who shared their lives with me during those years. There were just as many men who participated in our formation program over the years but, for one reason or another, chose not to continue with the Missionaries of the Precious Blood.

Over those years, I was also part of several Companion groups, directed the Companion retreat once, and the community retreats another time. I wrote numerous articles, served on the advisory board of the International Center for the Study of Precious Blood Spirituality in Salzburg, Austria, helped to organize the ministry of Precious Blood Parish Missions, preaching over twenty-five parish missions around the US, sharing our spirituality with thousands of people who participated in those missions and retreats. In all of those activities, I was often more blessed than those with whom I was sharing our spirituality.

Once, at the end of a parish mission, I challenged the participants to think of one thing that they might do as a result of the blessings they had received. Eight or nine months later, I received a Christmas card from one of the parishioners who had heard me preach. Included in the card was a newspaper article about the sender. She had decided to visit the local prison and begin sharing her faith with some of the inmates. In the article, she said she was inspired to do so during a parish mission the previous spring and even mentioned my name. One of the stories I told during that mission was about my experience visiting the women's jail in Orlando, Florida. Every Wednesday, four Catholic women would visit the jail. Once or twice a year, they would invite me to come along and share what I had preached about the previous Sunday. The first time I went with them, I finished what I had to say, and there was still a half hour left before they were to return to their cells. So we broke into small groups to share our personal reflections. As the group I joined began, one of the women turned to me and said that there was something I needed to know. Every day of the week, a different minister comes to the jail and conducts a service. Every day except Wednesdays, anyone in the jail can come to the service. But on Wednesdays, because the room only holds so many people, only the women on one of the floors can come each week. Everyone in the jail wants to come to the Catholic service, even

though very few of them are Catholic themselves. She told me that on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays, Mondays, and Tuesdays, a minister comes to the jail and tells them that they'll go to hell if they do not change their ways. "Hell," she said, "the locks on the doors, the guards in the hall, the judge, the lawyers – even my lawyer – tells me that. Some of my family and friends do as well. But on Wednesdays, four Catholic ladies come in here and tell us that God loves us anyway. And for an hour and a half, once every four weeks, we are free."

What happened to me when I preached in the women's jail in Orange County, Florida, changed my understanding of the power of the Good News to affect the lives of those who hear it. Telling that story inspired someone else to go and share the same Good News with men in a federal prison in Missouri. The ripple effects are often unknown, but they are just as real.

I believe that my legacy is all of those people whose lives intersected with mine. I'm not sure that I made a big difference in most of their lives, but they made a big difference in mine.



Questions for Reflection:

- Who has shaped your life and faith in ways you may never be able to fully express? How have their presence, words, or example helped form the person you are today?
- The women in jail found freedom in hearing that God loved them anyway. How has the message of God's unconditional love touched your own life, and how might you share that message with someone who feels forgotten or unworthy?
- Dr. Dennis reflects that his legacy is found not simply in his accomplishments, but in the lives of those whose paths crossed his own. When you reflect on your own life and faith, what ripples of love, hope, or faith do you hope to leave behind?