

Proclaiming Abundant Love

Biblical Reflections on the Spirituality of the Precious Blood

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Dennis
Christz,
C.P.P.S.

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1 PETER 1
Pauline literature, James, and 1 John suggest a common fund of tradition rather than direct dependence upon Paul. Such liturgical and traditions must have been very ancient and in some cases of Jewish origin. Yet it is unlikely that Peter addressed a letter to the Gentile churches while Paul was still alive. This suggests a period after the Minor epistles, perhaps A.D. 70-80. The author would be a disciple of Rome, representing a Petrine group that served as a bridge between the two peoples, and its flowering in the Gentile world. The origins of Christianity and its flowering in the Gentile world, though original would not be official persecution but the difficulty of living a life in a hostile, secular environment that espoused different values of the Christian minority to ridicule and oppression.

The principal divisions of the First Letter of Peter are the following:
I. Address (1, 1-2)
II. The Call and Call of God in Baptism (1, 3-2, 10)
III. The Church and its Mission (2, 11-12)
IV. Exhortation
V. Conclusion

I ADDRESS
CHAPTER I

Greeting 1 ^kPeter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the chosen sojourners of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are loved because of the knowledge of God the Father through sanctification by the Spirit, through obedience and sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ, may grace and peace be yours in abundance.

IF THE GIFT AND CALL OF GOD IN BAPTISM

1 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his abundant mercy and love has chosen us in himself before the foundation of the world, that we should be blameless and without blemish in his love when he presented us to himself as a peculiar people, zealous of good deeds, not by works but by his grace through the washing of the word in the living and abiding word of God.

with an indelible mark, as you attain the salvation of your souls, obediently filtering into the word, which is the living and abiding word of God. Concerning this salvation, which has been promised to us through the blood of Jesus Christ as of a spotless unblemished lamb, it was to be yours searching for it, investigating circumstances that the Spirit within them indicated with an intense desire, that you should be zealous of good deeds, which are the result of your faith, so that your faith and hope are in God. Mutual Love. 1 ^kSince you have purified yourselves by obedience to the truth for sincere mutual love, love one another intensely from a pure heart, as if you have been born anew, not from visible but from imperishable seed, through the living and abiding word of God.

2 All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of the field. The grass withers and the flower falls, and the word of the Lord remains forever. This is the word that we have heard and have seen with our eyes, which we have touched and have handled, and the word of life that has been given to us, and which we now proclaim to all men.

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in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the glories to follow them. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you with regard to the things that have now been pronounced to you by those who have preached the good news to you through the holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels longed to look. Obedience. 1 ^kTherefore, gird up the loins of your mind, live soberly, and set your hopes completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ^kLike obedient children, do not act in compliance with the desires of your former ignorance

of your own will, but as slaves of God, with reverence during the time of your conduct, as if you were being reasoned from your hearts, not with perishable things like silver or gold. ^kBut with the precious blood of Christ as of a spotless unblemished lamb. ^kHe was known before the foundation of the world but revealed in the final time for you, ^kwho through him believe in God who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. Mutual Love. 1 ^kSince you have purified yourselves by obedience to the truth for sincere mutual love, love one another intensely from a pure heart, as if you have been born anew, not from visible but from imperishable seed, through the living and abiding word of God.

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the sight of God. ^kI and my sinners, let yourselves be built up to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ, as says in scripture: "Behold, I am laying a cornerstone, a cornerstone, chosen and precious, and whoever believes in me will not be put to shame." ^kTherefore, its value is for you to have faith, but for those who do not believe, the stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone and a rock that will stumble and a rock that will fall. They stumble by disobedience to the word, and their destiny.

3 Therefore, if you have purified yourselves by obedience to the truth for sincere mutual love, love one another intensely from a pure heart, as if you have been born anew, not from visible but from imperishable seed, through the living and abiding word of God.

4 All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of the field. The grass withers and the flower falls, and the word of the Lord remains forever. This is the word that we have heard and have seen with our eyes, which we have touched and have handled, and the word of life that has been given to us, and which we now proclaim to all men.

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Biblical Reflections on the Spirituality
of the Precious Blood

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Missionaries of the
Precious Blood
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INTRODUCTION

Eleven years after I was ordained, I was asked, rather encouraged, to become the director of advanced formation for the Missionaries of the Precious Blood in the Cincinnati and Kansas City Provinces of the community. Until then I had not spent much time reading about or reflecting on the spirituality of the Precious Blood. However, I knew that part of my responsibility as a formation director was to hand down the spirituality to those who were seeking membership in the congregation. So, over the next few years, I read all of the books published in the Resource Series of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood that related to our spirituality. For me, the most important of those books was *In Water and In Blood* by Robert Schreiter, C.P.P.S. The writings of Barry Fischer,

C.P.P.S. were also central to my coming to understand this spirituality.

After being ordained sixteen years, I was asked to become the director of vocation ministry for the Missionaries of the Precious Blood. I would live in the house of initial formation and work out of the provincial house five or six miles away. Shortly after I moved in, several new candidates in formation with the congregation arrived. One evening at dinner, one of them asked Mark Hoying, C.P.P.S. and myself what was the most important thing about Precious Blood spirituality when we were preparing for membership in the congregation and ordination to the priesthood. We looked at each other and began to laugh. You see, when we were in formation, no one ever spoke about Precious Blood spirituality. There were devotions to the Precious Blood which we had become familiar with, prayers such as the *Seven Offerings* and the *Prayer for the Congregation*. We celebrated the feast days of St. Gaspar our founder and St. Francis Xavier our Patron. But we simply never talked about Precious Blood spirituality. As far as we knew those three words had never been connected until *In Water and in Blood* was published, which happened just after I was ordained.

In participating in several provincial assemblies and community retreats where either Bob Schreiter, C.P.P.S. or Barry Fischer, C.P.P.S. spoke, the spirituality became more and more central to the lives of the members of the congregation. They also shared their reflections in various

articles published both in the United States and in the international publications of both the congregations of Precious Blood men and women. Out of their writing and their presentations, the images that became central to our understanding of Precious Blood spirituality today emerged.

First there were only three images – covenant, cross and cup. As Bob Schreiter, C.P.P.S., was working and writing in the area of reconciliation, the fourth image emerged. Then in a passing comment in an article he wrote, he thought that we might need to add a fifth image – the image of the lamb once slain who lives.

The first advisory board of Precious Blood Parish Missions took the first four images as their inspiration in developing the first mission they designed – *Proclaiming Abundant Love*. That mission was meant to be an introduction to a contemporary Precious Blood Spirituality for the people of God in the parishes where Missionaries and Sisters of the Precious Blood, as well as Adorers of the Blood of Christ, serve. However, over the past twenty years, most of the parishes where the *Proclaiming Abundant Love* mission has been celebrated were not those parishes, but parishes that were simply looking for a message that would engage the spiritual imagination of their people.

Since preaching on the spirituality of the Precious Blood has been an important part of my ministry for many years, a number of people have asked me to write about it. At first, I struggled with what I would say. I wrote several

different outlines, but when the outline that eventually became this book came to me, I was certain that this was the way for me to go.

A contemporary spirituality of the Precious Blood is rooted in the scriptures. So I decided to look for scripture passages that spoke about the five images that are part of Precious Blood spirituality. First, I looked at those passages used in the *Proclaiming Abundant Love* mission. Then I did an electronic search of the Bible looking for those images throughout the scriptures.

Some of the reflections are just that reflections on the passage, others are stories from my life and from the lives of others whom I have known that arise out of reflection on both Precious Blood spirituality and our lives as men and women rooted in the Blood of Christ.

Spirituality is not meant to be some abstract theological insight. It is meant to be a way of living rooted in some aspect of our encounter with God. It is my hope that the scripture reflections that follow will help you see where God is at work in your life and enable you to grow closer to the One who shed his Precious Blood for us.

PEOPLE OF THE COVENANT

We are people of the covenant, people chosen by God to be in relationship with God. The covenant once established with Abraham and his descendants has been extended to all people through the life, death and resurrection of the Word made flesh, Jesus the Christ of Nazareth.

A covenant is a binding agreement between two or more parties. In the scriptures, it is always an agreement between two very unequal parties. God does not need the covenant. The recipient of the covenant is the one in need. Whether the covenant is between God and one person, God and a people or God and all people, the covenant is not for God's benefit, but for the benefit of those with whom God enters into covenant.

We begin this reflection on the spirituality of the Precious Blood by looking at the covenant sealed in blood between God and the people of God before the coming of the Christ. Then we move on to the writings of the apostles and the gospels.

OLD TESTAMENT IMAGES

The Covenant with Abram – Genesis 15:1-17

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”

But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”

And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.”

But the word of the LORD came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.”

He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Then he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.”

But he said, “O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?”

He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”

He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.

And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

Then the LORD said to Abram, “Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.

As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.

And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.

On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”

God made a covenant with Abram. God promised him a land where his descendants would dwell and prosper. The

sign of the covenant was the animals cut in half. It was a pledge that if God were to fail to keep God's part of the covenant, God would be cut in half. It doesn't matter that God could not actually be cut in half; the symbolism speaks to the seriousness with which God enters into covenant with Abram.

When God enters into covenant with us, God takes it seriously. God pledges to keep the covenant no matter what. God pledges to forfeit God's own life should God fail to keep up God's part of the covenant. Now, that's a serious commitment!

As part of the covenant God makes with Abram, God reveals that the road will not always be easy. There will in fact be difficult times – four hundred years of slavery in a foreign land. Yet throughout that time, God promises to be faithful to the covenant, to watch over the people in good times and in bad, and to ultimately give them everything God has promised to Abram.

The Mosaic Covenant – Exodus 24:3-8

Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do."

And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel.

He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of well-being to the Lord.

Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar.

Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient."

Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, "See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words."

They had been slaves in Egypt, set free by the grace of God and the miracles worked on their behalf. They had been twelve tribes, but on that day, they became one people – the people of God. They were descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and on that day, they became heirs of the covenants God had made with them. They had seen wonders as the angel of death passed over their homes and as waters were torn in two and dry land appeared so that they could walk on in freedom. And now, the God who had done so much for them was entering into covenant with them.

This covenant, signed in the blood of the sacrificed oxen, united them to God in a special way. Once the blood of the covenant had been splashed on them, they were stained by the covenant that united them as the People of God. Having only recently been freed from slavery, they didn't own a lot of clothing, and what they were wearing that day was now blood stained. They had no bleach or other things

that might clean their clothing. The rest of their journey, they would see those stains on their own clothes and on the clothes of those with whom they were traveling. They would be reminded of the covenant over and over again.

We, too, have been stained with the blood of the covenant. Though we cannot see those stains on our clothing, we have been stained permanently in the waters of baptism. The water that was splashed upon us that day continues to mark us as the People of God. The waters with which we sign ourselves as we come and go from church, the waters that are splashed upon us whenever we celebrate the Rite of Sprinkling with Holy Water at Mass, stain us inside and out as people of a covenant with the God who saves us.

A Life or Death Choice – Deuteronomy 30:11-20

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous,

and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

The people of Israel have been wandering in the desert for forty years, and they are just about to enter the Promised Land. So, Moses reminds them of the covenant made at Sinai and invites them to recommit themselves to it. He reminds them of the blessings and the curses associated with the covenant. Then he offers them a choice. “Choose life!” he implores them.

We, too, are offered a covenant with God. We, too, are offered a choice. We are invited to choose God, to choose the blessings and not the curse. But unlike the people of Israel, we are invited by Jesus to choose the cross, to choose what seems to be the curse, in order to receive the ultimate blessing. The blessing placed before us is not a long life on the land, but eternity in the reign of God. The blessing placed before us is salvation, the forgiveness of sins, the

pledge of everlasting life, but it comes with the curse of taking up our crosses and following Jesus, who suffered and died, that we might rise to a new and everlasting life. What will we choose?

A Choice Made – Joshua 24:1-2, 15-18

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore, we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

Like Moses before him, Joshua’s final address to the people of Israel is to remind them of the covenant God had made with them and of the responsibilities they had as the people

of God. Like Moses, he warns them about not following the covenant will mean for them. Once again, they are asked to confirm their commitment to the covenant, to the God of their ancestors in faith.

Every Sunday, as we gather for the eucharist, we are invited to renew the covenant we made in baptism. Rather than answering the questions placed before us long ago, we are invited to profess our faith by reciting the Creed. There is no warning about what happens to those who choose not to follow the Lord, not even a promise of the blessings that come with the covenant, but we who renew the covenant are invited to gather at the table of the Lord and to eat and drink the bread and wine that unite us to the living God through Jesus the Christ.

My Servant: A Covenant to the People – Isaiah 42:1-9

He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.

He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it:

I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as

a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.

See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Isaiah prophesies that God will send someone who will be “a covenant to the people.” This covenant will not be written on stone tablets or kept in the ark of the covenant in the Temple. This covenant will walk among the people. “He will faithfully bring forth justice.” He will never give up his work for justice.

This covenant, this person will be called by the LORD, called to do wondrous things – being a light to the nations, opening the eyes of the blind and setting prisoners free.

We Christians know this person to be Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Son of God. We know him because of all he did to fulfill this prophecy.

An Everlasting Covenant – Isaiah 54:10, 55:3, 59:21

For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the LORD: my spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouths of your children, or out of the mouths of your children's children, says the LORD, from now on and forever.

God's promise is forever. God does not set limits on the covenant. There is no end date. There are no conditions under which the covenant will be revoked. Earlier covenants had such conditions, but Isaiah proclaims that the covenant with God is irrevocable.

A Covenant Open to All – Isaiah 56:6-8

And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

For Isaiah, the covenant is not just with the house of Israel. It is a covenant with all people “who join themselves to the LORD.” This prophecy is addressed to Israel, but it lets them know that the covenant is not Israel's exclusive

possession. It belongs to all, to the “outcasts of Israel” and to all the “foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, ...[who] minister to him, ...[who] love the name of the LORD, ...who keep the sabbath, ...[who] hold fast to [God’s] covenant.”

In the gospels, Jesus quotes from this very passage, as he describes the Temple as “a house of prayer for all peoples.”

Most of us are not people of the covenant by birth. We are not genetically related to the people of Israel. We are people of the covenant because Jesus the Christ and his disciples after him have taught us “to love the name of the Lord and to be his servants.”

A Covenant Written in our Hearts – Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD;

for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

Jeremiah has received a message from God, a message for the people of God, the people of Israel and Judah. It is a message of hope for a people in turmoil. The people had already seen the destruction of the kingdom of Israel to the north, only a remnant of the once united kingdom remained, and it was threatened on every side. Other nations, larger and more powerful, were at war with one another, and Judah was an insignificant nation in between and in their way. One king had tried to reform the nation, restoring the covenant it had with God, the next had gone back to its evil ways, rejecting the covenant and following godless ways. All seemed hopeless, yet Jeremiah continued to bring a message of hope from God.

A new covenant, a covenant written on the heart, a covenant that could not be forgotten or disregarded was about to be made. This covenant was much more concise. It did not have hundreds of laws and precepts. It was quite simple: “I will be their God, and they will be my people.” This new covenant would be rooted in mercy: “I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.” Think of that a moment. The all-knowing God, whose memory is limitless, promises to forget the sins of the people.

Jeremiah’s promise to the people of Israel and Judah is fulfilled in the new covenant begun in Jesus Christ. It is a promise of hope not only to the people of Jeremiah’s time,

but also to the people of God for all time. It is not only a promise to the people of Israel and Judah, but it is also a promise to all those who have been redeemed in the blood of Christ. It is a promise that no matter how hopeless things may seem, God is always with us, God is always forgetting and forgiving our iniquities.

The new covenant is indeed written in our hearts. It is indeed a covenant between God and all of humanity. It is a covenant that brings mercy and reconciliation for all people.

The Covenant Proclaimed Anew – Nehemiah

8:2-6, 8-10

Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose.... And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people

understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Imagine what it must have been like that day. The people of Israel had lived in exile and were now returning home. They gathered before the ruins of the holy city, a city they had never seen and only dreamed of seeing while they were in exile. They had not heard the word of the Lord addressed to them throughout their time of exile. And now, they were there, home again, and hearing the Word of the Lord for the first time in years. In exile, they had not known of the covenant God had made with the people of Israel. But now, home again, the promises of God were being proclaimed once again.

As they heard the words of the covenant proclaimed, they were overcome with emotion. Never had they known of the promises of God, of God's great love and concern for them. Standing in the ruins of Jerusalem, the promise of God to be their God was almost too much to understand, too much to bear.

Today, we hear the Word of God every time we gather together. It is proclaimed so regularly that we may be tempted to take it for granted. But many of the people gathered with Ezra and Nehemiah that day had never heard the story of their salvation, let alone of the promises of God. As we listen to the Word of God, we are called to be grateful for the Word proclaimed.

The Sacred Constitution of the Divine Liturgy from the Second Vatican Council invites us to recognize the real presence of Christ in the Word proclaimed, as well as in the people gathered and the ministers ministering. We often recognize God in the bread and wine blessed, broken and shared, but we are also called to recognize the real presence in people gathered, ministers ministering and Word proclaimed as the people who gathered with Ezra and Nehemiah did that day so long ago.

**The Promises of God Proclaimed Anew – Ezekiel
36:23-28, 37:24-28**

I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you;

and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the

land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. They shall live in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, in which your ancestors lived; they and their children and their children's children shall live there forever; and my servant David shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations shall know that I the LORD sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them forevermore.

Through the prophet Ezekiel, God renews the covenant with Israel. Once again, the people have been in exile, and God sent a prophet to encourage them and give them hope. Once again, the people are reminded of the promises of God, of God's side of the covenant. God not only promises to return them to the Promised Land, but God also promises to give them new hearts, to put God's spirit within them, to reestablish the covenant they had forsaken, not because they

had turned back to God, but because God had once again turn to them. This is God's initiative, God's willingness to restore the covenant which they had broken. God wanted to put the pieces back together, but not just back together the way they were before, but back together into an even more glorious future for God's Chosen People.

Too often, today, Christians think that they are saved by their "personal relationship with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ." The opposite is actually true. We are not saved because we have a relationship with God in Christ, but precisely because God had chosen to have a relationship with us. It is God's initiative that saves us, not ours. God chose to send Jesus Christ to be our Savior. We did not. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves.

A number of years ago, some evangelical Christians came to our house. They asked me if I had been saved. I answered them quite simply, "Yes, and I had nothing to do with it. It happened some two thousand years ago." God saved me, not because of my choice(s), but because of God's choice. If I think I had anything to do with it, I will be tempted to arrogance. If I know that it is all God's working, pure grace, then I can only respond with gratefulness.

The promises of God made through the prophet Ezekiel invite the same response, gratefulness for all that God has done, is doing, and will do for us.

NEW TESTAMENT IMAGES

Strangers No Longer – Ephesians 2:12-22

Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

The Ephesians, like most of us, were not part of the “commonwealth of Israel.” We were, in fact, strangers and aliens to the covenant God had made with Abraham and his descendants. The promise had not been made to our ancestors. Nevertheless, “we who were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

We, who were not related to the people of the covenant by blood (or DNA), are now related to one another and to God by blood – by the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ. We are now part of the family of God, blood relatives through water and the Holy Spirit and through the blood of Christ poured out for us all.

By this new covenant, no one is a stranger to the covenant of promise. All of us have hope with God in the world. This new covenant in the blood of Christ not only changes our relationship with God. It also changes our relationship with one another. No one is a stranger. All are brought near by what God has done for us. Everyone is near to our hearts because of the One who has made us near to God’s heart.

Christ: Mediator of a New Covenant – Hebrews 9:11-15

When Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!

For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant.

The people of Israel, in accord with the Mosaic covenant, offered the blood of sheep and goats as a sin offering to the Lord. They offered it year after year, believing that it had only a temporary effect on their relationship with God.

In the new covenant, Christ offered his own precious blood, once and for all, for the forgiveness of sin. This is the sacrifice of the new and eternal covenant in Christ's blood. It takes away sin once and for all time.

Closer Than Ever to God – Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and

the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews paints a picture of great glory and majesty. Because of Christ, we have come to a Mount Zion more glorious than the one in Jerusalem. We stand, not only before the Holy of Holies, but before the One who is holiness, glory and majesty itself. We stand before the very throne of God.

The Assumption Chapel at St. Charles Center, the retirement home of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood in Carthagena, Ohio, features a mosaic with an inscription from this scripture passage. It includes an image of Christ dying, rising and ascending all at the same time. Precious Blood and glorious grace flow from his hands and his side. He stands on Mount Zion, but also on Mount Sinai, Golgotha, and on the mountains where he was transfigured and ascended into the heavens. We, who view this mosaic, stand not only before Mount Zion, but before the very presence of God, all because of the One who shed his blood for us, the One who is the mediator of the new covenant.

Not Silver or Gold, But the Precious Blood of Christ –

1 Peter 1:17-21

If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile.

You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.

He was destined before the foundation of the world but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake.

Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

Often when subjugated people entered into a covenant with the one to whom they were subjugated, they would be required to pledge not only fidelity, but also their most precious belongings, things like silver and gold. However, the covenant we have with God is not one of subjugation, but one of reconciliation and salvation. Rather than offering our most prized possessions to God, God offers us something more precious than silver or gold. God offers us the Precious Blood of Jesus that ransoms us from “the futile ways inherited from our ancestors.” The master establishes a new relationship, not of subjugation, but of justification – a new covenant unlike any other. This new covenant in the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ raises us up, rather than puts us down. This new covenant is not a treaty of

surrender to the one who has defeated us in battle, but a promise that gives us new hope and enables us to be in relationship with God.

Washed in the Blood of the Lamb – Revelation 7:9-17

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.”

Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason, they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Imagine, if you will, that you are part of that great multitude that no one could count. You are among those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. You are among those who are crying out in a loud voice saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

This is not an imaginary world. This is the world we are all invited into. We don't have to do anything to earn it. The tickets have already been purchased and are waiting at will call. All of us, no matter what nation, tribe or people we belong to, no matter what our past may be, no matter how unworthy we may seem have washed our robes in the blood of the Lamb. Actually, it is not we who have washed our robes, our robes have been washed by God.

When we were washed in the waters of baptism, our robes were washed in the blood of the Lamb. When we were anointed with the oil of salvation, our robes were washed in the blood of the Lamb. When we ate the Body and drank the Blood of the Lord Jesus, our robes were washed in the blood of the Lamb. When our sins were forgiven, not because we deserved to be forgiven but because of the merciful grace of God, our robes were washed in the blood of the Lamb, Over and over again, by God's grace, our robes were washed in the blood of the Lamb and we were counted among that great multitude that no one could count.

GOSPEL IMAGES

Cup of the New Covenant – Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:14-20

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God

comes.” Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”

At the Last Supper, Jesus takes a cup of wine and proclaims that it is the cup of the new covenant. A new covenant begins when he shares his Precious Blood with those gathered for the Last Supper. The Precious Blood he shares with them is the same blood that will be shed the following day on Calvary. The cup of the new covenant is both a cup by which he shares his life with his followers and a cup of blood to be shed on the cross.

This cup of the new covenant is shared with us whenever we do this in memory of Jesus the Christ, whenever we gather at the table of the Lord to eat his Body and drink his Blood. By drinking this cup, we are united with Christ in the new covenant. When we share the cup of the new covenant, we drink the fruit of the vine with Christ in his father’s Kingdom.

The Kingdom where we drink the Blood of the Lamb is not somewhere out there. It is not simply a Kingdom where we will live once we die. It is here and now. Our sharing this cup makes the Kingdom present, and we become citizens of that Kingdom.

The challenge for us is to live as citizens of that Kingdom, to really believe that the Kingdom is at hand, to live as those

in whose veins and arteries flows the Precious Blood of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ.

CONCLUSIONS

We are people of the covenant – people whom God has chosen – people for whom God is willing to give up God’s own life – people who have been stained with the blood of the covenant – people who have committed themselves to an everlasting covenant – people on whose hearts God has written God’s promises – people whose sins are remembered no more – people brought back when we have wandered away – people who are united as one flock, one family – people redeemed once and for all by the new high priest, Jesus the Christ – people whose salvation was purchased not by silver or gold, but by the precious blood of Jesus – people who have washed their robes and made the white in the blood of the Lamb – people who drink the cup of Christ’s blood, the blood of the new and eternal covenant.

When I was young and not so bright, I thought I had to do something to deserve salvation. I bought into the heresy of Jansenism. I believed that I was not good enough for God. I couldn’t image that God would choose me, save me, forgive me, love me for no other reason than that God chose, saved, forgave and loved me. I thought that I had to do something extraordinary in order to deserve God’s love and mercy. As I came to know God more deeply, as I reflected on the Word of God, as I learned more and more

about the spirituality of the Precious Blood, I came to know that I and we are all saved by pure and undeserved grace. “God so loved us that God sent the Son not to condemn the world by that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16-17).

It was easy for me to believe that I was not good enough. I had heard that message so many times, especially once I had failed the third grade. Almost everyone around me constantly reminded me that I was a failure. Then, after sixth grade, my family moved to another neighborhood, a new parish and a new school. Then I met people who did not know my past failures. I met people who gave me a second chance. In particular, I met Precious Blood priests and sisters who did not look upon me with pity, but who opened up for me a new possibility. Whether they knew it or not, their kindness welcomed me into the covenant, gave me hope, and enabled me to believe in a God who loved me, not for what I had or had not done, but just because I was.

All of us are people of the covenant, not because we have been faithful, but because God is faithful, not because we are good, but because God is good, not because we have a personal relationship with God, but because God has a personal relationship with us. We are people of the covenant because God scatters blessings not only on those who show promise, but on everyone (see the parable of the sower and the seed [Matthew 13:3-9]).

The Good News of Jesus Christ can thus be summarized quite simply – we are the people of the covenant, the covenant between God and all of humanity, the covenant of love for all creation, now and forever.

When I lived in Orlando, the priests did not live in a rectory. We lived in a house much like the other houses in our neighborhood. There was no sign that our house was any different from anyone else's. So one afternoon, as I was napping, someone came to the front door. They asked me one very simple question, "Have you been saved?" It was a question I had heard before from evangelical Christians who were trying to spread the good news. But I was in no mood to debate with them on that particular Sunday afternoon. So I answered quite simply, "Yes. It happened about 2,000 year ago, and I had nothing to do with it." Then I shut the door and returned to my napping.

I've heard on numerous occasions that we are saved by our personal relationship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The covenant God has with us is kind of one sided. God puts in all the effort. God is always faithful to the covenant, even when I am or we are not. Salvation does not depend on my side of the agreement or my side of the relationship. Salvation depends only on the grace of God. That does not excuse us from doing anything. In fact, it calls us to do even more. It calls us to a life of gratitude, of praise and thanksgiving for all that God has done for us.

What I am called to do by the covenant is not to earn anything, but to respond to what I have been given with faithfulness to God because of God's faithfulness to me. God's faithfulness does not require my faithfulness, it inspires it; it makes it possible.

PEOPLE OF THE CROSS

We are people of the cross. Paul reminds us of this when he says, “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” We believe that we are saved by the power of the cross. St. Gaspar often encouraged the members of the community “to study the book of the cross.”

We encounter Christ whenever we encounter the cross in our lives or in our world. We need not go looking for the cross, for the cross will find us one way or another. We can choose to embrace the cross or to flee from it, but we cannot avoid it. The cross will be part of our lives no matter what.

OLD TESTAMENT IMAGES

Choose Life? – Deuteronomy 30:15-20

[Moses said,] “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”

Once we know the story of Jesus, the choice Moses places before us may just have a different outcome. Moses wants the people to choose life. Yet once we understand the meaning of the cross, Jesus asks us to choose death, to embrace the cross, to be willing to give our life away in order to possess much more than the land that the LORD swore to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. When we choose the

cross, we come to possess not an earthly kingdom, but the Kingdom of God. Choose life? No, today we, as people of the cross, are invited to choose death, and in choosing death, in choosing the cross, we are in fact choosing the life of Christ, a life that even death cannot destroy.

A Prayer from the Cross – Psalm 22

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.

In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them.

To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people.

All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;

“Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver— let him rescue the one in whom he delights!”

Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

Many bulls encircle me, strong bulls of Bashan surround me; they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion.

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.

For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me. My hands and feet have shriveled; I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me; they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.

But you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid!

Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog!

Save me from the mouth of the lion! From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.

I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you: You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.

From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord. May your hearts live forever!

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the

Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.

For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.

To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him.

Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord,

and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.

In the summer of 1974, we learned that my grandmother had colon cancer. At that time, there were few options to treat it, and it was rare that anyone survived it. She did receive radiation treatments, which at the time were considered experimental and were no where near as successful as they are today. I was a seminarian in college, so I did the only thing I knew how to do, I prayed. I prayed for a miracle. I even took a class on methods of prayer, hoping that one of them would lead to a cure. But no miracle occurred and no healing happened.

My grandmother went from about 250 pounds to less than a hundred over the next nine months. Yet somehow, she was still filled with hope and faith in the Lord. I saw her during spring break, and she could barely walk, but she insisted on celebrating my birthday almost four weeks early that year and was carried to a chair in the dining room of

her home. There a cake had been prepared by a friend using one of her favorite recipes. Throughout the celebration, everyone in the family assumed that this would be the last time we celebrated anything together.

After returning to college, I decided that if God would not grant me a miracle for my grandmother, I would not continue to study for the priesthood. I was so angry with God that on a dreary Sunday afternoon a couple of weeks after Easter, I went into the college chapel to tell God how I really felt. Somewhat afraid of God, I chose to pray Psalm 22. I looked around to make sure that no one else was in a chapel as I cried out in a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why do you not listen to my prayer?" When I got to the end of the psalm, where the psalmist promises that he will proclaim God's praises, I doubted that that would happen. I was so emotionally drained that I fell asleep, sitting on the floor of the sanctuary.

I'm not sure how long I slept, but when I woke up, it felt as if someone was holding me the way my grandmother had when I was a child, and a voice deep inside of me whispered, "Dennis, I know what it is like. Someone I loved once died, too." And there, just a few feet in front of me was the image of the one God loved, who had died upon the cross. And together, God and I wept for those who died and were dying. Held in the arms of God, I cried out, "She's suffered long enough. If you want her, she's yours." Then I got up and walked back to my room in the dorm. As I sat

on the bed, I could hear the phone ringing down the hall. [This was a time when there were no cell phones and college dorms typically had only one phone on each floor.] Then someone knocked on my door. As I opened it, he said, “It’s your mother.” When I got to the phone, she told me that my grandmother had died five minutes ago. Five minutes ago, I had told God, “If you want her, she’s yours.”

When I got the news, I wanted to cry, but I couldn’t, because I knew that she was now in the arms of the God who had just recently held me and comforted me.

I don’t know if you have ever heard the voice of God or been held in God’s comforting hands, but I know that the one who prayed the opening line of Psalm 22 on the cross in Mark’s and Matthew’s version of the passion, was with me that day and will be with you, too, when the cross comes your way. For nine months, I had thought that God had abandoned me. Hanging on the cross, Jesus did the same. But that day, I learned that God had been with me through it all, just as God had been with Jesus through it all. So now, I can proclaim God’s praises in the assembly of God’s people because I have experienced the power of the cross.

Another Prayer on the Cross – Psalm 31

In you, O LORD, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me. Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.

You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name’s

sake lead me and guide me, take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge.

Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.

You hate those who pay regard to worthless idols, but I trust in the LORD. I will exult and rejoice in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have taken heed of my adversities, and have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy; you have set my feet in a broad place.

Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away.

I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. For I hear the whispering of many— terror all around! — as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life. But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, “You are my God.”

My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors. Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love. Do not let me be put to shame, O LORD, for I call on you; let the wicked be put to shame; let them go dumbfounded to Sheol. Let the lying lips be stilled that speak insolently against the righteous with pride and contempt.

O how abundant is your goodness that you have laid up for those who fear you, and accomplished for those

who take refuge in you, in the sight of everyone! In the shelter of your presence you hide them from human plots; you hold them safe under your shelter from contentious tongues.

Blessed be the LORD, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me when I was beset as a city under siege. I had said in my alarm, "I am driven far from your sight." But you heard my supplications when I cried out to you for help.

Love the LORD, all you his saints. The LORD preserves the faithful, but abundantly repays the one who acts haughtily. Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the LORD.

In Luke's Passion narrative, Jesus' last words come from this Psalm. The psalmist does not deny his sufferings. Yet, he puts all his hope in God. Just as Mark and Matthew describe Jesus's final words one way, and Luke another. So, my grandmother's experience of her dying seemed more in line with this psalm than with the previous one [Psalm 22]. She did not deny her suffering, but she never gave up hope in the Lord. She always believed that God was with her in the midst of her suffering.

Sometimes, when confronted with the cross, we cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." Other times, we confidently say, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Both prayers acknowledge God. Both can be honest reactions to our suffering, our encounter with the cross.

A Prophecy of the Suffering Servant – Isaiah

52:13 – 53:12

See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up and shall be very high.

Just as there were many who were astonished at him—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals—so he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.

Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.

They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.

Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

This prophecy is proclaimed on Good Friday. Isaiah's words are used to describe the sufferings of Jesus and to proclaim their meaning. He did it for us. Jesus was the suffering servant who on the cross was clearly nothing to look at, nothing that would cause anyone to think of him as someone who was blessed by God. But it was our infirmities that he bore; our sins that he carried. He was a scapegoat for everything evil we had done, and he won for us salvation.

The cross has become more than a means of capital punishment. Somehow, by his suffering, Jesus has transformed his sufferings into our salvation, the cause of our joy. If we did not know the whole story, the cross would always look gruesome. It would certainly look like something to turn away from. Yet, we gaze upon the cross and see salvation.

When I was young, Good Friday seemed to be observed as a day when we should feel guilty for our sins. The service seemed to say, “Look at what you did to him!” rather than what this scripture passage says, “Look at what he did for you!” In many ways and in many places Good Friday is not celebrated. It is not a day of joy. Yet when we look at what Jesus did for us, when we see to what extent he was willing to go for us, how can we be anything but grateful, anything but joyful. For on Good Friday we recall the wondrous love of God that has revealed to us in the sufferings of his only begotten Son.

NEW TESTAMENT IMAGES

God Proves His Love for Us on the Cross –

Romans 5:6-11

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been

justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

If God had waited until we were ready to be saved – if God had waited until we deserved to be saved – we would still be waiting. Even now, we are not quite ready. We do not deserve to be saved. Yet “we have been justified by his blood.” “We were reconciled to God through the death of his Son.”

I don't know about you, but for me, this is the reason for our hope!

The Cross, More Powerful than Wisdom – 1

Corinthians 1:18-25

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified,

a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

The cross makes no sense to anyone except those who are being saved by it. It looks absolutely ridiculous to some and completely foolish to others. To us – to the people of the cross – it is the power of God.

The author of Hebrews seems to be saying that if you want it to make sense look elsewhere. However, if you want to bask in the salvation and power of God, then stand at the foot of the cross and stand in awe before its power.

**Not with Wisdom, but by the Power of God – 1
Corinthians 2:1-5**

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

According to Paul, the mystery of God is not proclaimed by “lofty words or wisdom,” but by Jesus Christ crucified. Our faith does not, therefore, rest on human wisdom, but on the power of God revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ. It all depends on the cross!

Boast in the Cross – Galatians 6:14

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul is writing to a community caught in a controversy about circumcision. Some people are boasting that they have been circumcised as a sign of their conversion to Christ. But Paul, who was circumcised as a Jewish infant, reminds them that there is only one thing that they should boast about. It is the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today, there are some who boast about their good works, their prayer life, their faithfulness to what they perceive to be the most important aspects of the Christian faith. Yet Paul's message to the Galatians is clear – never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

If we are proud of our faithfulness, then we are certainly not poor in spirit, as Christ calls us to be. Any of us can be tempted to arrogance about how we are living the faith. Then, however, we are making it sound like we are saved by our actions rather than by the grace of God. The cross of Christ and the salvation won by it are pure gift, unearned and undeserved. Therefore, we have nothing to boast about, but the cross that saves us.

Become Near to God in the Cross – Ephesians 2:13-22

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he

is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

When Paul writes to the Ephesians, he is writing to a Christian community primarily made up of Gentile Christians. They were people who had not known the God of Israel. They were far off, but Christ brought them close to God through the cross. Christ did not die just for the people of Israel but for the whole human race.

No matter how far off we may have been, no matter the distance that separates us from those who might be considered holy, we are no longer separated from God. God has made us one, has united us all in the blood of the cross.

There are those in our world today who would like to divide us, who would even like to divide one group of

Christians from another, but we are all brought near by the blood of Christ. It is not for us to judge, to condemn, to decide who belong and who doesn't belong to the people of God. God has already made that decision. God has broken down the dividing wall. God has reconciled the hostility between us. Yet sometimes, it seems, that there are those among us who seek to rebuild that wall that divides us, to not only enable hostility to exist, but to encourage it. However, in Christ, we are all citizens with saints. None of us are strangers or aliens. We are all one, because of what God has done for us on the cross of Jesus Christ.

**Not What You Might Expect – Hebrews
12:18-19, 22-24**

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

The author of the Hebrews first tells us what coming before the throne of God is not. It is nothing one would expect. There is no great display of awesome power.

There is, however, the heavenly Jerusalem, where the blood of Jesus speaks eloquently of God and God's wondrous power and might.

The mural in the chapel at St. Charles Center in Carthagen, Ohio is based on this scene. It is a vision of the heavenly Jerusalem, with Christ as the central figure, surrounded not only by "innumerable angels," but also by the hand of God and coming of the Spirit. The blood of Christ flows from his hands and side and is radiant as it flows upon the earth. While there is no cross, it is absolutely clear that Christ is crucified and glorified, and that his blessings – i.e. his Precious Blood – are flowing out to us all.

GOSPEL IMAGES

Take Up Your Cross – Matthew 10: 38-39, Matthew 16:24-25, Mark 8:34-35, Luke 9:23, Luke 14:27

"Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

[Jesus] called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them

deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Then [Jesus] said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”

“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

Many in the crowd must have wondered what he was talking about. Who in their right mind wants to take up a cross? What kind of a person would willingly wish to carry a cross that leads to torture and death? It almost seems as if Jesus is trying to drive people away.

Whenever I hear this reading, I wonder what cross he has in mind for me. I wonder if I am really willing to deny myself and take up my cross. Not knowing what cross awaits me, it is easy to say that I am ready and willing to do so. However, when the cross does come my way, I'm not sure how I will actually respond. Will I embrace it or flee from it? Will I take it up, but complain about it the whole time? Will I look for an easy way out or will I take it in my hands with courage and fortitude?

Knowing that he took up his cross, knowing the suffering he endured, knowing that the cross ultimately did not defeat

him, gives me hope. If I thought the cross was the end, if I thought the cross would defeat me, I certainly would not take it up, but because I know what those who heard him did not know, I know about the resurrection. I know that the story does not end on Calvary, or even at the empty tomb, I have hope. I have hope that I, too, can endure whatever cross comes my way, because I know what the Father did for him in raising him from the dead, and I know the promise he made once risen, “I will be with you always!”

**Help Is on the Way – Matthew 27:32, Mark 15:21,
Luke 23:26**

As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry [Jesus’] cross.

They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.

As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus.

Jesus did not – could not – carry the cross by himself. He needed help. It was too much of a burden for any one man, let alone one who had been severely beaten, to carry. Those who led him to Calvary saw this and provided him with the help he needed. As far as we can tell, Simon was not a willing participant in this. He was compelled to do so.

As we carry our crosses, God often sends someone to help us. We don't carry our crosses alone. We, as followers of Christ, are also compelled to help others as they carry their crosses. I know from my own experience that whenever my cross seems too hard to bear, someone always comes along to help me.

**Tempted to Flee the Cross – Matthew 27:39-43,
Mark 15:29-32a**

Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'"

Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe."

Jesus was tempted to flee the cross, not by Satan as in the desert, but by passers-by and by religious leaders who did

not understand what they were talking about. We may be tempted to flee the cross, too. Who wouldn't be? After all it is the cross, it is painful, it looks hopeless, it seems fruitless.

The chief priest, the scribes and the elders did not understand that it was precisely because he was the King of Israel and God's Son that even if he wanted to, he could not come down from the cross, that he had to stay faithful. Coming down from the cross may have been an option, but if he had we wouldn't know the extent of God's love for us. If he had come down from the cross, we would be a people without salvation, without hope. If he had come down from the cross, we would never be able to endure the crosses that come our way. Jesus, as Son of God, may have had the power to come down, but he had the love to stay the course, to stay there to the bitter end, because he knew that even there the Father was with him. We, too, can endure our crosses because he endured his, and because we, too, know that the Father, the Spirit and he are always with us until the end of time.

Not Alone – Matthew 27:55-56, Mark 15:40-41, Luke 23:27, John 19:25b

Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome.

These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

While many had deserted him, even most of his disciples, he was not alone as he hung on the cross. There were still several faithful women who stood at the foot of the cross, comforting Jesus and one another. He did not die alone. He did not die surrounded by strangers jeering at him. He died surrounded by people who loved him.

When it seems that everyone has deserted us, we are not alone. At the very least the Spirit remains with us, as does the mother of the Lord. Neither of them will ever desert us.

**Abandoned/Forsaken – Matthew 27:45-46,
Mark 15:33-34**

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

In Mark's and Matthew's passion narrative, as Jesus hung upon the cross, he felt forsaken and abandoned, even by God. The pain must have been more than anyone could endure. So, he prayed. And though he felt abandoned, we know, because we know the rest of the story, that Jesus was in fact not abandoned by God. For if he had been forsaken by God, he never would have risen from the dead.

When we feel abandoned or forsaken, even by God, we, too, can cry out, "Why have you forsaken me?" God can handle our despair, even our anger, because God already knows the ultimate outcome. God knows how things will end, even though we do not.

The promise of the resurrection is for us as it was for Jesus, that even when we can't see, hear or feel the presence of God, God is there with us, even suffering with us as he did with his Son on the cross.

At the end of World War II, scrolled on the wall of one of the concentration camps was this saying. "I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining, I believe in love, even when I am alone, and I believe in God even when he is silent." By praying to God, even when he felt forsaken and

abandoned, Jesus reveals his faith that God is still listening not matter how it feels.

Into Your Hands – Luke 23:44-45

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last.

In Luke's passion narrative, Jesus commends his spirit to God. His body is racked with pain. He is probably disappointed that his disciples have gone into hiding. Yet he knows that God is with him. He knows that God holds him in the palm of God's hand. He knows what he is doing on that cross and who he is doing it for. So, in his final moments of life, he once again trusts that God has a plan, that God cares for him, that God can and will take even this tragedy and turn it into triumph. He may not know exactly how that will happen, but he knows that it will happen, and with this confidence he can pray, "Father, into your hands..."

There have been times when I've sat with someone who was dying, and no matter how bad things seemed, they were confident in God's loving mercy. They knew, they didn't just believe. They knew that in the end they would see God. Their faith has inspired me, and I have been blessed to stand with them in the shadow of the cross and witness their faith.

Everything Is Finished – John 19:28-30

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), “I am thirsty.” A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, “It is finished.” Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Jesus was finished. Everything he came to accomplish was complete. The work of redemption was finished. There was nothing left to do. He had given it all, all that he could give, even his very life. It was finished. It is finished. There was nothing left to do but bow his head and give up his spirit.

Sometimes we are tempted to think that there is something more to do, something we must do to complete the work of salvation. Sometimes we are tempted to believe the heresy that says that we must earn salvation, that we have to be worthy of it, that God expects something from us in order to be saved. Jesus' last words before his death in John's gospel remind us that salvation is finished, redemption is done. We could never do enough to deserve it. We could never be good enough, holy enough, to be worthy of salvation. It is simply a gift, purchased by God on the cross for us.

Some people say that that lets us off the hook too easily. Maybe so. Yet if we believe that the work of salvation is done, is finished, then we can live a life in constant thanksgiving for what God has done for us on the cross. We can stand in awe before the cross of Jesus. We can live as those who

are already saved by the grace – the amazing grace – of God revealed to us in the One who has already finished it for us.

CONCLUSIONS

St. Gaspar often told the early Missionaries of the Precious Blood that they must “study the book of the Cross.” He took a cross with him whenever he went to preach. He proudly wore a cross on his cassock, so that all who saw him could look upon it.

Prior to Vatican II, when one focused on the cross, the message was often delivered in such a way as to make one feel guilty for sending Jesus to his death. It was our sins that led to his sacrifice. As the spirituality of the Precious Blood developed, the focus has changed. It is not about what we have done as much as it is about what Christ has done for us. Rather than feeling guilty when we look upon the cross, we ought to feel thankful and in awe of what Christ did in order that we might be reconciled with God and grow in holiness.

The cross is a sign of mercy, not condemnation, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16-17).

Artists throughout history have known this when they have embellished the cross with precious metals and

gemstones. They have turned the cross from something ugly, something to turn away from, into a thing of beauty in order that we might remember what the cross is really all about. Instead of being a sign of death, the cross has become a sign of life, a revelation of the glory of God at work in our world.

Sometimes, when celebrating Good Friday, I am tempted to sing an Alleluia, because we have been saved by the wood of the cross. The world has changed because of what Christ did for us. Salvation came about when he hung his head and died. Mercy was revealed to us all from the cross of Christ. We venerate the cross, not because of the suffering that took place there, but because of the salvation that came about that day on that place.

When we face the cross in our lives, the cross of Christ becomes a sign of hope, for we know that the cross is not the end of the story. We know that the cross is a stop on the way to eternal glory with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There are times when we'd like to flee from the cross, when the burden seems too much to bear. Yet when we reflect on the cross of Jesus Christ, when we remember that his cross did not ultimately end in defeat, then we can face our crosses because he faced his and emerged triumphant from the tomb. In Jesus Christ, the cross has become our sign of victory.

Some theologians are so convinced that the cross is the central act of our redemption that they say they say that

the resurrection was not necessary for our salvation. The resurrection, however, was necessary for us to know that we were saved on the cross.

I once attended a retreat given for the priests of the diocese of Orlando. The guest speaker told us that he had visited several churches in the diocese on his way to the hotel where we were gathering. They were all rather new constructions and rather than crosses several of them had images of the resurrected Christ in them. Then he said that we needed to have crosses or crucifixes, not resurrected Christs in our places of worship. First, he said that we know what a crucifixion looked like in the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus. However, we have absolutely no idea what Jesus looked like once raised from the dead. We know that because in every resurrection story in the gospels those who knew him best did not at first recognize him. Secondly, he told us we needed crosses because when things are going well it really doesn't matter what image hangs on the wall before us. However, when things are not going well, it is essential that the image before us remind us that God knows what it is to suffer, and that if God was present that day on Calvary, God is present here and now no matter how bad our here and now might be. I don't remember anything else that presenter said during that retreat, but I do remember how he challenged us to remember the power of the cross.

PEOPLE OF THE CUP

We are people of the cup. Each time we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, we drink from the cup of the Precious Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the cup of the new covenant, the cup of salvation, the cup of suffering, the cup of mercy, the cup of hope and the cup of thanksgiving. It is the cup that transforms those who drink of it from mere mortals into vessels of divinity.

When we drink of the cup of the Precious Blood, the blood of Christ flows through our arteries and veins. We are changed forever. God dwells in us.

OLD TESTAMENT IMAGES

A Cup of Blessing – Genesis 14:18-20a

King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. He blessed him and

said, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!”

Melchizedek, priest of God Most High, offers a cup of blessing to God Most High and calls down a blessing upon Abraham. Until that time, sacrifices to the gods were always live animals or in some cases even human sacrifices. Yet Melchizedek offers bread and wine to God Most High. This becomes a sign that these simple gifts are indeed worthy of God. It also becomes clear that these simple gifts can bestow upon us a blessing, for it is clear that Abraham was indeed richly blessed by God when this cup of blessing was offered to God.

A Cupbearer’s Dream – Genesis 40:5-13, 20-21

One night they both dreamed—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison—each his own dream, and each dream with its own meaning. When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. So he asked Pharaoh’s officers, who were with him in custody in his master’s house, “Why are your faces downcast today?” They said to him, “We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them.” And Joseph said to them, “Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me.”

So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, “In my dream there was a vine before me, and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms came out and the clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh’s cup was in my hand; and I took

the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand." Then Joseph said to him, "This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days; within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office; and you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer."

On the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, he made a feast for all his servants, and lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants. He restored the chief cupbearer to his cupbearing, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand.

God has a dream for all of us, a dream that we might all be cupbearers – not cupbearers for Pharaoh, but cupbearers of God. The cupbearer in this reading bears only a cup of the finest wine the nation has to offer, but we bear in our hands the cup that contains the very presence of God. The cup we bear is far more precious than any cup owned by Pharaoh. The cup we bear is for us to drink and for us to share. The cup the cupbearer held in his hands was not for him to drink, it was meant for one and only one person, Pharaoh. The cup we hold in our hands in for all the world.

The cupbearer was restored to his ministry of cupbearing by Pharaoh's favor. We are restored by the cup itself and the precious drink within it that washes away every sin and restores us to favor with God.

A Cup of Rejoicing – Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10

Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could

hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

The people of Israel had just returned from exile where they had not heard the word of the Lord for many years, nor had they stood before the gates of the holy city. On that day, before they entered the Holy City, many of them heard

the word of the Lord proclaimed for the first time in their lives. Their parents and grandparents may have told them about it, but until that that day, they had never heard it for themselves. Until that day, they had not known how close their God truly was to them. Until that day, they did not know what it really meant to be the Chosen People. Once they heard the word of the Lord, they were overcome with emotion. When he had finished proclaiming the word of the Lord, Ezra instructed the people to celebrate, to “eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks.”

When we have finished hearing the Word of the Lord proclaimed, we are invited to “eat rich food and drink sweet drinks,” too. We are invited to eat the Body and drink the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ.

Since we hear the Word of the Lord every time we gather around the table of the Lord, we often fail to be in awe that our God is willing to speak to us, that our God has chosen us to be a people peculiarly God’s own. Since we feast on the Body and Blood of the Lord so regularly, we often forget what a great privilege it is to do so. Nevertheless, this is the Word of God we hear, this is the Body and Blood of Christ on which we feast, and we are richly blessed!

An Overflowing Cup – Psalm 23:5-6

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

Since the Lord is our shepherd, our cup overflows with blessings. Goodness and mercy follow us every day of our lives.

The Psalmist had no idea what blessings would come to us through the overflowing cup of blessings that we share whenever we drink from the chalice of salvation. He couldn't even imagine what it would be like, not only to dwell in the house of the Lord, but to become the very dwelling place of the Lord. The cup that overflows for us makes us vessels of Christ's Blood, vessels of divinity itself. The cup that overflows for us not only enables us to dwell in the house of the Lord, but it enables the Lord to dwell in us, and we are richly blessed.

Taste and See – Psalm 34:1-8

I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.

My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the humble hear and be glad.

O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together.

I sought the LORD, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.

Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed.

This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD, and was saved from every trouble.

The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.

O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.

Whenever the people of Israel gathered in their homes to celebrate the start of the Sabbath or one of their feasts, they took a cup of wine, said a blessing and shared it with one another. This cup of blessing was always a reminder that they had been blessed and an invitation to give thanks to the Lord their God.

Psalms 34, like that cup of blessing, is a way of remembering what God had done for those who prayed it and giving thanks. The final line of the excerpt we have here is an invitation to take that cup of blessing, to “taste and see that the Lord is good.”

Whenever we take the cup of blessing, the chalice of the Precious Blood, we are invited to “taste and see that the Lord is good,” to remember what Christ has done for us, and to give thanks. Whenever we take this cup, we are invited to “magnify the Lord,” to “exalt his name together,” to be radiant” and to “never be ashamed.” We are invited to remember how God has answered us and delivered us from all our fears, and to give thanks for whenever we have cried, we “were heard by the Lord” and “saved from every trouble.”

The cup we share is thus a cup of blessing, a cup of remembrance and a cup of thanksgiving.

The Cup of Salvation – Psalm 116:1-13

I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my supplications. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the name of the LORD: “O LORD, I pray, save my life!”

Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful. The LORD protects the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me.

Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you. For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling.

I walk before the LORD in the land of the living. I kept my faith, even when I said, “I am greatly afflicted”; I said in my consternation, “Everyone is a liar.”

What shall I return to the LORD for all his bounty to me? **I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.**

While the official way to offer thanks to God was to offer a thanksgiving sacrifice in the Temple, most people could not do so unless they traveled to Jerusalem, usually for one of the high holy days on the Jewish calendar. However, they could “lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord” any time they wished, especially when they gathered as a family to celebrate the beginning of the Sabbath.

The Psalmist lists many things to be thankful for. We can be thankful that God has heard our prayers, that God is gracious, righteous and merciful, that God has “delivered [our souls] from death.” God “has dealt bountifully with” us, has “delivered [our] eyes from tears, [our] feet from stumbling.”

There is so much for which to be thankful, so we “lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.” The cup of salvation is also the cup of thanksgiving. When we recognize the salvation we have from God, we cannot help but be thankful.

Well-aged Wines for Free – Isaiah 25:6 and Isaiah 55:1

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

The Lord invites us to a feast, “rich food” and “well-aged wines,” the best of everything.

The Lord invites us to eat and drink for free, “without money and without price.”

The cup we share is a free gift from God. We do not earn a place at the table. The place has already been set. It is waiting for us – God is waiting for us. The banquet is prepared. We do not have to wait until we are worthy. We do not have to wait until some far distant time. The banquet is ready now. We don’t need reservations. We don’t need to save up until we can afford the feast. A place is waiting for us here and now.

There are no strings attached. Come as you are. The only

one who waits is God. God waits for us to come to the feast. There are some people who think that only certain people are worthy, but God has prepared a feast “for all peoples.” There are some who would invite only those who are good enough, but according to Isaiah, and Jesus after him, no one is excluded.

When Jesus fed the thousands who were hungry, there was no test to see who understood his teachings, who was good enough. He simply fed them all. At the Last Supper, he even fed Judas knowing he would betray him and Peter knowing he would deny him. He fed them all, knowing that most would run and hide when the going got tough. He fed them rich food and choice wines. He fed them his very own Body and Blood, the best food and drink anyone could imagine.

NEW TESTAMENT IMAGES

The Cup of Blessing – 1 Corinthians 10:16a

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, assumes that the community gathers regularly to drink of the cup of blessing. Otherwise, there is no reason to ask the question. Paul asked the question in the context of admonishing his fellow Christians to avoid the worship of idols. He reminded them that the cup they drink is not the same as a toast to an idol, to a god who is no god at all. He reminded them that what

they drink is nothing less than the very presence of God, poured out for them in the blood of Christ. Paul reminded them that this is no ordinary cup of wine, no ordinary after dinner toast. This is “the cup of blessing,” “a sharing in the blood of Christ.” They ought not take it for granted.

Those of us who drink of the cup of blessing can do it so often that we take it for granted. We can forget just how precious a gift this cup of blessing truly is. We can drink it without thinking, without remembering just how wondrous it is that our God is sharing God’s very self with us. Sometimes, like the people of Corinth, we need to be reminded that the cup that we bless is indeed “a sharing in the blood of Christ.”

Cup of the New Covenant – 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

The letter to the Corinthians was written before any of the gospels. Therefore, it contains the earliest reference to the institution of the Eucharist. The synoptic gospels tell the same story. Jesus takes the cup of wine and declares that it is

the cup of his blood – the blood of the new covenant. The old covenant was ratified in the blood of animals sacrificed to God, but the new covenant is ratified with a cup of wine that has been transformed into the blood of Christ. In the old covenant, the blood is provided by the people who offer the sacrifice. In the new covenant, the blood is provided by God in Christ. The sacrifice is offered by Christ to the Father on behalf of God’s people. In Christ, a new relationship is established with God. By the shedding of his blood and our drinking from this cup, we are united to God in a new way.

The cup of the new covenant enables us to not only know God and to be God’s Chosen People. The cup of the new covenant unites us to God in a new way. Christ’s blood now flows throughout our bodies. Divinity itself dwells in us.

GOSPEL IMAGES

Can You Drink? – Mark 10:35-40, Matthew 20:20-23

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the

baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” He said to them, “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”

Whether James and John or their mother first asked about sitting on the thrones on either side of Jesus is irrelevant. What matters is the question Jesus asked in response, “Can you drink?” They, of course, believed that they were able to do so. How hard is it to drink? They, however, didn’t know what they were saying yes to. They thought it was just about taking a sip from the same goblet as Jesus. They did not understand what he was talking about. They did not realize that he was speaking about the cup of suffering that he would soon be drinking. They were thinking about a cup of glory, after all, they were fixated on thrones and earthly kingdoms. They had no idea about the kingdom that awaited him or them, or what it would take to get there.

We, like James and John are not afraid to drink from the cup of glory. The cup of suffering is another thing all together. In both Mark's and Matthew's gospels, Jesus follows up his statement about the cup with a statement about service. The cup of suffering may not necessarily be a cup that leads to martyrdom, but it is always a cup that calls us to the service of others. It is always a cup that challenges us to think of others and their place in the kingdom before we think of ourselves and our place in that kingdom.

Unlike James and John, we already know what cup Jesus offers up. We know that it is both the cup of glory and the cup of suffering – the cup of salvation and the cup of sacrifice – the cup of redemption and the cup of service to others. And knowing this, Jesus asks us, “Can you drink from this cup knowing its consequences?” – a question that needs to be taken seriously and seriously pondered. Can I drink the cup of sacrifice, the cup of suffering, the cup of service to others?

**A Drink in the Kingdom of God – Matthew 26:27-29,
Mark 14:23-25, Luke 22:14-18**

Then [Jesus] took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

Then [Jesus] took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.”

In each of the synoptic gospels, Jesus not only says that this is the cup of the new covenant, but he also says that he will not drink it again until he does so in the Father’s kingdom or in the kingdom of God. While there are no specific references to Jesus’ drinking anything after the resurrection, he undoubtedly did. Since there are several times that he asked for food or provided food to his disciples, one can easily presume that he also drank something. Since wine was often the preferred drink with a meal at that time, he probably drank from the fruit of the vine with his disciples on those occasions. If he did so, then the words he spoke at the Last Supper were fulfilled. The kingdom of God had indeed come into the world.

From the gospels, we know that Jesus had said that the kingdom of God was at hand, and that he had instructed his disciples to announce it to the people as well. Now, when we drink of the cup of his Precious Blood, we drink it in the Father's kingdom. We drink it with Christ in the kingdom of God. We need to recognize that we live in God's kingdom, here and now. We do not wait for it to come at the end of time or at the end of our earthly lives. We drink it now in the kingdom of God!

Take this Cup from Me – Luke 22:39-44

Jesus came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial."

Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done."

[Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.]

Sometimes the cup seems too heavy to handle. As Jesus faced his arrest, condemnation, torture and death upon the cross, the cup seemed too much of a burden for him. He prayed that he might be spared of its consequences. Yet ultimately, he did drink from the cup because it was the will of the Father to do so, and he always did the will of the Father.

The cup he prayed about that day was the cup of suffering. None of us ever wants to drink from the cup of suffering. We want to avoid it at all costs. Yet sometimes it comes our way whether we like it or not. Sometimes, however, we take it up for the very same reason that Jesus did. We take up the cup of suffering in order to bring about something else, something more wondrous for ourselves or for those we love. Jesus took up the cup of suffering because he knew it would result in our salvation. He took up the cup of suffering because he knew it would, by the grace of God, be transformed into the cup of salvation, the cup of glory.

CONCLUSIONS

We are people of the cup. We take up the cup and give thanks to the Lord. We drink in his Precious Blood, and our blood becomes precious. We share in this most precious cup. **It is the cup of the new covenant.**

The cup of the new covenant is what Jesus called it at the Last Supper. Yet when we hear these words, we must also remember that this covenant is ratified for all creation in the shedding of the Precious Blood, but for each of us individually, we enter this new covenant in the waters of baptism.

This new covenant, Jeremiah tells us, is written on our hearts, and Jesus witnesses to this new covenant first by his own experience of baptism. So, when we share the cup of the new covenant, we are in effect renewing that covenant which we entered into in the waters of baptism.

The Baptism of the Lord is always celebrated in early January, and the Temptations are recalled on the First Sunday of Lent. Yet in all of the Synoptic Gospels, the two events are intimately related. Jesus goes to the Jordan to hear the preaching of John. He joins crowds from throughout Israel to listen to this flamboyant preacher, and like so many of John's listeners, Jesus is moved to be baptized. Yet unlike anyone else who was baptized by John, Jesus sees the heavens opening, the Spirit descending upon him like a bird flying down from above, and hears a voice from heaven calling out, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

No wonder he had to take some time alone. Nothing like this had happened to him before.

He had been the son of the carpenter, a carpenter himself. He had worked no wonders, had no disciples, and proclaimed no message. He had simply done what most men of his age did, until that day when the skies were opened and the voice from heaven called out. He had to spend some time alone, trying to figure out what all of this meant. He couldn't just go back to Nazareth as if nothing had happened. Something had happened. A new chapter in his life was beginning. Nothing would ever be the same.

No wonder he was tempted in the desert. God had called him the beloved Son, with whom God was well pleased. But why was God well pleased with him? What had he ever done to deserve such a greeting?

If I were Jesus, I might have been tempted to go home and forget the whole thing. I might have been tempted to think it was all an illusion. I might have wondered, why me? I might have recalled what often happened to those who had been called by God in the past. I might have remembered how they were treated by the very people they had been sent to help.

I might have wished, like so many prophets before me, that God would call someone else. I might have tried to come up with an excuse to reject the call, to go back to the comfortable life I had been living. That's just me.

Matthew and Luke go into more details about the temptations Jesus faced. They say that after forty days of fasting, he was hungry, and he was tempted to turn a stone into a loaf of bread. He was tempted to use the powers God had given him for his own benefit, but somehow during his time in the desert he realized that God had given him special powers, not for his own sake, but for the sake of others. He would one day use those powers to feed crowds of thousands, to heal the sick and raise the dead to new life. But he would never use his power for his own benefit.

While I suspect that like me, none of you has ever been tempted to turn a stone into a loaf of bread. But I also suspect that like me, you have been tempted to use the blessings God has given you for your own benefit.

Matthew and Luke go on to say that Jesus was tempted to throw himself off the parapet of the Temple. The devil

reminded him that nothing terrible would happen, after all God had promised that his angels would look after him.

It took a long time for me to figure out what this temptation was really all about. Then I realized that I had been tempted, like Jesus, to make a spectacle of myself, showing off so that others would think more highly of me.

The parapet of the Temple is near the main staircase to the Temple and there would certainly be a crowd there, there almost always was. If Jesus were to throw himself off the parapet of the Temple and land unhurt, the crowds would most certainly come rushing to see him, but then it would have been all about him instead of about the God and Father of us all who sent him. The messenger might become more important than the message. Jesus would have been a showoff, seeking only the crowd's attention for himself rather than for the reign of God which he was being called to proclaim.

The last temptation described by Matthew and Luke was the temptation to worship the devil. The devil knows about the Kingdom of God which Jesus has come to establish, he even seems to know that it won't be easy, that it will in fact be extremely difficult. So he tempts Jesus to establish his own kingdom by taking the easy way.

And, haven't we all be tempted to do that, to find a way that isn't so painful, so labor intensive, so full of risks and the possibility that not only will things not work out the way we had hoped, but that they might end up with ridicule,

defeat, and rejection, even from the people we most care about? “One simple bow, here and now, and you get to avoid all the pain and suffering, and you still end up with a kingdom of your own!” the devil is saying.

The cup of the new covenant reminds us to reject these temptations, precisely because we know what the new covenant really calls us to, to the Kingdom of God, not to our own kingdoms, but to God’s Kingdom, where the peace will not be an illusion created by Satan, but the real peace that comes from God alone.

So let us reject Satan’s temptations, and let us remember, that in the waters of baptism and in the cup of the new covenant, we are all the beloved sons and daughters of God, and that though we do not deserve it, God is always well pleased with us.

It is the cup of salvation.

During the summer of 1994, while the Guatemalan Civil War was still raging, I visited that country for the first time. After being in Guatemala City for a week, I was invited to join one of my fellow Missionaries of the Precious Blood on a two week visit to the village of Tukurú. Shortly after I arrived, I discovered that almost no one in town even spoke Spanish, and that most of the people only spoke Q’echi, one of the many Mayan languages still spoken in the rural villages of Guatemala. So, on Sunday morning when the Mass would be celebrated in Q’echi, I decided to sit among the people, with my English prayer book, and pray with

the people in silence as they prayed out loud to the one and same God who would understand us all.

I took a seat in the third bench and waited for Mass to begin. The bench was just wide enough for three people to sit comfortably. By the time that the marimbas were warming up for the opening song, there were four of us. Then she came in and sat next to me. We were shoulder to shoulder and cheek to cheek. She was wet, covered with mud and didn't smell so great. So, when she sat next me, I was wet, covered in mud and didn't smell so great on one side.

At the sign of peace, she reached out to me, and we exchanged the typical handshake I had learned earlier in the week. We both went forward and received the body and blood of Christ at communion. When she returned to the bench, her face was radiant with joy. When Mass ended, she approached the pastor and spoke with him for a little while, and I would have forgotten all about her except for what the pastor told me at lunch that day.

“The woman who sat next to you at Mass this morning comes from one of the forty-nine villages in the parish where we celebrate Mass once or twice a year. This morning, she woke up, just as the sun was beginning to rise, and she had a feeling deep down inside that if she did not receive the eucharist today, she would literally starve to death before the sun set this evening. So, she walked for three hours in the pouring rain, on steep mountain trails, where she slipped and fell in the mud a few times, as she walked to the

nearest village where she knew they would be celebrating the Eucharist.”

She walked three hours there, mostly downhill, knowing that the return trip would take even longer, all for what looks like a morsel of bread and few drops of wine. She would spend seven hours walking those steep mountain trails in the pouring rain in order to save her life. She knew that the cup we would share was the cup of salvation. She knew that it would not only save her, but that it would enable her to bring that same hope to her family and to those who lived in her village who would not have made that long trek in the pouring rain.

She knew, and she taught me, how precious this cup we share truly is. More than anything I read about the eucharist, her silent walking taught me that this is indeed the cup of salvation.

It is the cup of mercy.

When I was a child, we prepared for all of the sacraments by studying the Baltimore Catechism. When it came to the sacrament of penance, we were told that the right way to seek God’s mercy was contrition, confession, penance and absolution. First you had to be sorry. Then you had to say you were sorry. Then you had to do something to prove that you were sorry. And finally, you would be forgiven.

That is not, however, the way the mercy of God works, at least not according to the Word of God.

In the writings of the prophet Isaiah, God does not

bestow mercy on the people because of what they have done. God bestows mercy, not for what they did, but for God's own sake.

In Luke's gospel, Zacchaeus does not beg for mercy. He does not go to Jesus asking for forgiveness. It is Jesus who reaches out to him. It is Jesus who calls Zacchaeus down from the sycamore tree, not to reprimand him for being a traitor to his people, a conspirator with the occupying army of Rome, or someone who had grown rich off the taxes he collected from his own people.

Jesus calls Zacchaeus down from that tree to offer mercy. Zacchaeus responds to God's mercy with generosity and penance, but Jesus never asks him to do so.

The woman caught in adultery never admits her guilt. She never asks for forgiveness. It seems, at least in the way the story is told, that she is indeed guilty. But Jesus offers mercy. "Let the one without sin cast the first stone." And then he doesn't ask her about what she has done. He only asks her, "Has no one stayed to condemn you?" "No one, sir," she responds. And he tells her to go, she is forgiven, and she shouldn't do it again.

I believe that this woman became a disciple. How else would John know the story, unless she had told others about what happened when she and Jesus were alone?

Twenty years ago, I attended an international symposium on Precious Blood spirituality and reconciliation in Lima, Peru. Most of what I heard there, I have forgotten a long

time ago, but I will never forget the story told by a woman named Vilma.

Vilma, like everyone else in Chile, lived through the violence of the Pinochet revolution in her home country. As often happened during that time, soldiers would come during the night to take away anyone even suspected of being against the Pinochet government. One day it happened in her home. Soldiers burst in in the middle of the night, dragging her son away, and he was never seen again. Years later, as the country was going through a process of truth and reconciliation, she met a soldier from that time who was seeking reconciliation with the people he had once persecuted. Vilma was a volunteer who would meet with such men and listen to their stories and seek to heal their pain.

After she had met with this particular young man several times, after she had told him of the mercy of God, he confessed one more war crime. He had been one of the soldiers who broke into her home. He had been one of those who dragged her son away. He had been one of those who threw him out of the open door of a helicopter as it flew out over the Pacific Ocean.

She had wanted to hate him, but somehow that grace of God that had enabled him to confess his crime had also come upon her. Somehow, both of them had encountered the cup of mercy and been transformed by it.

When we share the cup of mercy, not only are we forgiven by the grace of God, but we are also enabled to become those whom St. Paul calls “ambassadors of mercy.” Each time we pray the Lord’s prayer, we ask God to make us ambassadors of God’s mercy as we pray that God would forgive us as we forgive those who sin against us. Only the cup of mercy makes that possible.

It is a cup of hope.

Paul connects hope with the shedding of Christ’s blood. We have hope, precisely because while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (see Romans 5:6-8)

Jesus had just told his disciples that he would “suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after the third day.” He told them that they would have to deny themselves, take up their crosses and follow him.

They had no idea what he was talking about. They must have wondered if they really wanted to follow him under these circumstances. And when what he said made the situation seem hopeless, he takes some of them up a high mountain and shows them glory!

They still don’t know what he meant when he talked about being rejected and put to death. They’re still not sure what it means for them to take up their crosses and follow him. But they have had a vision of glory and that makes all the difference. They now have hope.

Many years ago, three of our candidates in formation

met me in Guatemala. They had come to see what Precious Blood spirituality looked like in another part of the world. The Guatemalan civil war was still going on. People were still suffering. And almost every day, Fr. Noè, our host, took us to see another historic church. And in every church we visited, there were three major statues: The crucifix, the dead Christ, and the sorrowful mother.

One evening, one of the seminarians asked me if we had to go to another church and look at another statue of the dead Christ. It all seemed too gruesome to look at again. So, I ask him not to look at the statue the next time we were in such a church, but to look at the people kneeling before it.

The following night, I asked him what he had seen. "I saw hope." The people he saw that day were living through their own crucifixion. They had seen dead bodies lying along the side of the road. But the statue of the dead Christ gave them hope. They had hope because looking at that statue they knew that their God had suffered, too. They knew that their God was suffering with them now, and that gave them hope.

When the cup is placed on the altar, as the deacon or priest pours wine and water into it, we are invited to pour our hopes and dreams, our cares and concerns into that cup, because it will soon be transformed into the cup of hope for us.

It is a cup of suffering.

This is the cup of suffering that Jesus asks James and John if they are willing to drink of it. It is also the cup of suffering

that Jesus asks the Father to take away if at all possible.

Over the years, I have met many people who have been in the midst of suffering. They didn't seek it, but when it came their way, they took the cup of suffering into their hands and drank every last drop of it. I have also met those who have sought to leave the cup of suffering on the table. Like Jesus, they have called on the Father to take this cup away from them.

In my own life, I have responded to the cup of suffering in both ways. Sometimes I am willing to drink of it, and other times I just wish it would pass me by. Sometimes I am able to thank God for it, and other times I beg God to take it away.

In my life, I have had the privilege of knowing several martyrs. When I was a seminarian, I was invited to sing in the choir for the ordination of several auxiliary bishops in the cathedral in Cleveland. After the celebration there was a reception, and at the reception I met Jean Donovan, a young woman who had been doing volunteer work at the mission sponsored by the diocese in El Salvador. A few weeks after the celebration she returned to the mission, where later she would be murdered by soldiers along with three religious sisters. When I met her, she knew that it would be dangerous to return to El Salvador. She knew about the archbishop, St. Oscar Romero, who had just recently been executed for calling for peace in the land. She knew about priests, catechists and others who had been killed for doing

nothing more than caring about the poor and standing up for their rights. She knew that the cup of suffering was a real possibility, but she loved the people of El Salvador and couldn't imagine abandoning them in the midst of their suffering. So she returned to El Salvador, she took up the cup of suffering and paid for it with her life.

A few years later, I was part of an intercongregational retreat for members of several different Precious Blood communities in the United States. One of those I met that week was Sr. Agnes Mueller, an Adorer of the Blood of Christ, who was back in the US for a few months before she returned to Liberia to work at a mission there with four other ASC sisters. While they were back in the US, they were praying and discerning whether or not they should return to the mission. A civil war was raging, and Liberia was not a safe place to be. However, her heart was with the people she had come to serve and had come to love along the way. While she and the other sisters knew the danger that awaited them, they were willing to take the chance. They willingly took up the cup of suffering, and the following year they, too, were executed by soldiers for doing nothing more than caring for those in need. Pope St. John Paul II called them martyrs of charity when a Mass was celebrated for them at the Vatican shortly after their deaths.

When I think of these brave women who willingly drank from the cup of suffering, I wonder what I would do if I had to face the situations they faced. Could I drink that cup of suffering? I honestly do not know.

However, I have drank from the cup of suffering when someone I loved was taken away by death, when physical ailments prevented me from doing things I had otherwise been able to do. I spent over three years unable to walk. I couldn't put any weight on my right foot. I had seven surgeries trying to save it, but in the end, my right foot was amputated. Many people have told me that they do not know how I could do it, but I know that the cup of suffering I endure is also a cup that strengthens me to face the difficulties before me. That is also what Jean Donovan and Agnes Mueller knew when they took up the cup of suffering in their lives.

It is a cup of memory.

The cup we share we share in memory of Jesus, the one who gave us this cup in the first place and asked us to do this in his memory. Yet it is much more than the memory of what Jesus did at one gathering of his disciples at table on one particular day. It is a cup of memory that reminds us of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, of all that he did and all that he taught. It is a memory of all that led up to his coming and all that has transpired since his coming. It is a memory of the creative power of God, the choosing of particular people to whom God chose to reveal Godself. It is a memory of all those sent to proclaim God's message, whether that be a message of hope or a challenge to reform the way the people of God lived out their faith. It is a memory of patriarchs and matriarchs, of prophets and

rulers of the people. It is a memory of those who witnessed their faith throughout history. It is a memory of all that was done to spread the faith from Jerusalem on Pentecost to this very day throughout the world. The cup of memory is a blessing cup, because it reminds us how blessed we have been throughout history.

The cup of memory is also the cup of our own personal memories, of the good times and the bad, of all the times when God has been active in our lives. Sometimes the only way we can understand how God has been active in our lives is by looking back. Sometimes it is hard to see the hand of God in the present moment. Sometimes the only way we can see clearly is by looking back in order to look forward more clearly as well. Sometimes we need to remember anew – to remember in a new way. The cup of memory challenges us to remember the past in a new way, seeing the hand of God at work even in those events where the absence of God at first glance seems more obvious.

It is a cup of thanksgiving.

During a traditional Jewish Seder, there are four cups of wine that are drunk during the dinner. The fourth cup is part of the closing ritual, which includes a prayer of praise and thanksgiving. Many scripture scholars believe that Jesus used this cup to be the “cup of the new and eternal covenant.” He took the cup of thanksgiving and transformed it into the cup of his precious blood. It is still a cup of thanksgiving, but it is so much more than that for us who are being saved by it.

There are so many things for which to be thankful. When I was a seminarian, one of my directors would often say, “We need to have an attitude of gratitude.” We always laughed at his pronunciation of both word – he pronounced the second syllable of each word “tee.” Of course, he was right. When we have an attitude of gratitude, we can’t help but be filled with joy.

The cup of thanksgiving reminds us to have such an attitude directed toward God for all that God has done for us. Several of the psalms remind us of the same thing. They call on the people of God to always be thankful.

Since the early days of the Church, what we do when we take up the cup of thanksgiving with our fellow Christians in memory of Jesus has been called *eucharistos* – the Greek word for thanksgiving. As Christians, the Eucharist is and always has been a thanksgiving dinner, a thanksgiving sacrifice offered to our God. The bread we break and the wine we share are our thanksgiving meal. The Body and Blood of Christ are our thanksgiving sacrifice.

PEOPLE RECONCILED

We are people reconciled to God and to one another. The very first story about our human ancestors is a story of their disobedience to the Lord. Whoever our first ancestors were, those who wrote the first stories of our faith believed that human beings were in need of reconciliation. That's why, in the Genesis story of Adam and Eve and their sinfulness the biblical author tells us that God promises that one day we will be reconciled, just as one day we injured our relationship with God.

In his book on reconciliation, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order and Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality & Strategies*, Robert Schreiter, C.P.P.S. reminds us over and over again that reconciliation

always begins with the victim, with the one who was offended or injured. If we understand reconciliation as a spiritual activity, it always begins with God, whether the reconciliation is between God and humanity, God and a specific human being, one group of human beings and other group of human beings or one human being and another one. It does not begin with the one who committed the offence. It does not begin with him or her expressing regret or sorrow, but with the offer of mercy.

Schreiter reminds us that reconciliation is not about forgetting but about remembering in a new way. It is not about restoring a broken relationship but about constructing a new one. It is not about going back to the way things were before the relationship was shattered, but about going forward to create a new relationship, a relationship where each participant sees the other as a full human being, entitled to the dignity all people deserve as children of the Creator.

We can never go back to the garden of Eden, but we can enter into a relationship with God who loves us, not because we have sufficiently repented, but because God's mercy is more than sufficient to bring us into a relationship of love and compassion.

We are people reconciled, not by what we have done, but by what God has done for us!

OLD TESTAMENT IMAGES

The Lord Is Kind and Merciful – Psalm 103:1-3, 8, 10-12

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits – who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,

The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.

While there are plenty of passages in the Hebrew Scriptures where God is portrayed as vengeful, full of righteous indignation and wrath, there are those places where God is also pictured as full of mercy and compassion. This Psalm is one of those places. God is described as “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” God is seen as the One who casts our sins so far away, that the distance cannot be measured.

When I was a newly ordained priest there was a woman who came to confession every day, and every day she confessed the same sin. It was something she had done over twenty-five years earlier. After two weeks, I decided I needed to do more than simply offer her a penance and

absolution. So I confronted her with this simple truth. The sin she committed long ago had been forgiven long ago. However, the sin she was committing could not be forgiven until she believed it was a sin. The sin I was talking about was her unbelief in the power of God to forgive. If she had believed in God's mercy, she would not need to confess the same sin over and over again. It was forgiven the first time, not because she was sufficiently penitent, but because God was more than sufficiently merciful.

Majestic and Merciful – Sirach 2:18b

For equal to his majesty is his mercy.

The wisdom of Ben Sirach reminds us just how great is God's mercy. It is as great as the majesty that surrounds our God. So, if you believe that God is full of majesty and honor, then you must also believe that God is full of overflowing mercy.

Our Sins Become White – Isaiah 1:18

Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

Our sins may be blood red, but God's grace and mercy can and do transform them. Though there was no stain remover that could change something from scarlet or crimson to white, God could do just that. No matter how dirty our sins, his grace can do wonders.

God Forgives and Forgets – Isaiah 43:25

I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.

Through Isaiah the prophet, God proclaims that the One who can remember everything chooses to forget our sins. God remembers them no more.

When I was a child, we were taught that God remembered our sins forever, so that on judgement day, they could all be laid out in front of us and a just judgement could be rendered. However, that is not the God described for us by the prophet Isaiah. God is not keeping track of our sins. Instead of reminding us of all our sins, I believe, God asks only one thing of us at the final judgement. It is the same question Jesus asked Peter when he prepared breakfast for the apostles after the resurrection on the sea of Galilee, “Do you love me?” God does not ask us for an accounting of everything we’ve ever done. God does not demand perfect justice by human standards. Rather, God remembers our sins no more.

God Will Abundantly Pardon – Isaiah 55:6-8

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.

Isaiah invites the people of Israel not to hide from the Lord who allowed them to be sent into exile, but to “seek the Lord while he may be found.” The people are to call upon God so that God might have mercy. People who sometimes lived in fear of God were reassured that God would “abundantly pardon.”

The same prophets who called the people away from their evil ways, the same prophets who condemned them for their actions, called them back to a God who would offer them forgiveness beyond measure. God’s mercy, the prophet assures us, is greater than our sins.

Though our enemies on earth might not be so forgiving, God’s way of thinking is not our ways of thinking, nor are God’s ways our ways. God’s thoughts are full of forgiveness. God’s way is a way of mercy.

Mercy Leads to Knowing God – Jeremiah 31:34

No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel both tell us the same thing – God will remember our sins no more. However, Jeremiah adds that, once God has forgiven us, we will “know the Lord.” For the people of Israel to know someone is more than to know about that person. It is more than being acquainted with him or her. It is to be in a deep relationship with the

other. To know someone is to be intimately connected with them. It is a relationship of love and mutual respect. Husbands and wives were to know each other so well that they became like one-person, inseparable forever. That is what Jeremiah wants of us: to know that we are forgiven, that God remembers our sins no more, so that we will be intimately connected to our God forever. We will have no secrets from God and God will have no secrets from us, and even though God could remember everything about us, God chooses to forgive our iniquity and remember our sin no more.

God Cleanses Us of Our Guilt – Jeremiah 33:8

I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me.

Jeremiah had warned the people about what would happen if they did not change their ways. He criticized them for their lack of faith. Yet in the end, he delivered a message of mercy. He told them that God would wipe away their guilt and cleanse them of their sins.

There are times in our lives, when it is not God who inflicts guilt upon us, but we who fail to let God remove the guilt from our lives.

There is a scene in the movie *The Mission* that illustrates this wonderfully. The conquistador who has killed his brother for sleeping with the conquistador's fiancé, gives himself the penance of dragging his suit of armor and his weapons

of war with him as he heads toward the mission where he will seek to make up for all his past sins. However, the weight of his guilt keeps pulling him back. As he climbs up a rugged cliff, he falls again and again, because he cannot let go of the burden that he carries with him. When he gets near the top of the cliff, the weight of the bundle he carries threatens to pull him back one more time, when suddenly one of the indigenous people who lives above the falls cut the rope that sets him free. All the conquistador can do is weep. He has been set free from the burden of his guilt. Not only that, but the person who set him free was the very same person who at the very beginning of the movie just barely escaped from being captured and enslaved by that very conquistador. [I had to watch the movie a second time to make sure that I had seen that right.]

The very same God against whom the people of Israel at the time of Jeremiah who had been unfaithful, was the same God who offered them mercy. Somehow, that news seems almost too good to be true, and so we carry the guilt of our sins with us. Yet Jeremiah reminds the people of his day and us that God not only seeks to cleanse us of our sins, but God also seeks to cleanse us of our guilt.

NEW TESTAMENT IMAGES

While We Were Still Sinners – Romans 5:6-11

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for

a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us, that we might be reconciled once and for all with our God and Father. If God had to wait for us to be ready for God's forgiveness, if God had to wait for us to be worthy of God's mercy, God would still be waiting.

This reading reminds us that our salvation, the reconciliation we have in Christ and through his Precious Blood, is pure gift. We did nothing to earn it, nothing to deserve it. It reminds us just how awesome is our God.

Reconciliation does not necessarily return us to some previous relationship. It establishes a new relationship. In his books on reconciliation, Bob Schreiter, C.P.P.S., often reminds us that when we are reconciled with one another we do not forget what may have caused us to become enemies or to be estranged from one another. We simply remember what happened in a new way. We remember it through a new lens, a new way of seeing our past, our present and our future.

God, as Ezekiel and Jeremiah reminded us, remembers our sins no more. That doesn't mean that God doesn't remember what we've done. It means that God remembers us not as disobedient children, but as sons and daughters for whom God would do anything to make us one with God. God does not think of us as sinners, but as those who are saved by God's own grace.

Saved and Sent – 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

First of all, Paul reminds us that reconciliation is God's work. We are reconciled by what God has done. Then Paul prompts us to do for others what God has done for us. Then he bestows on us a new title. We are ambassadors for Christ. We are ambassadors of reconciliation. We are messengers of mercy. All of this because of how we have been reconciled to God by Christ.

There are several times in the gospels when Jesus works a miracle and then tells the recipient of that miracle not to tell anyone. This is not one of those times. As ambassadors, we speak for the one who sent us. We deliver God's message, and God's message is quite simple, "You and I have been reconciled to God!" God did this for us. God did this through Christ.

God has made us a new creation. It as if sin had not entered into our lives because Christ took upon himself all of our sins and allowed them to be crucified so that we could start over, fresh and cleansed by God's grace.

GOSPEL IMAGES

Paralyzed by Sin – Mark 2:1-12

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them.

Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic – “I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

One way of looking at this gospel passage is to see the paralyzed man as a sinner. Sometimes, we, like him, are paralyzed by sin. Sin weighs us down. We don’t know how to overcome it. That is when we, like the paralyzed man, need others to help us face our sins and be relieved of what prevents us from getting up and moving forward.

Another way is to look at the story focusing on those who were questioning Jesus’ words. They could not understand what Jesus was doing. They didn’t believe that he could dispense mercy. In their minds, only God could forgive sins, and Jesus clearly was not God, as far as they could tell. We, however, have the benefit of knowing more of the story. We now know about his passion, death and resurrection. So, we are not as amazed as those who had seen the paralytic man healed. Yet, we too, should look at the blessings we have seen and be amazed and glorify God.

Jesus, on the other hand, knows something else, as well. He knows that whether seeking healing or forgiveness, it

is mercy that changes everything. For Jesus, “Your sins are forgiven” and “Stand up and take your mat and walk” are the same thing. They are both acts of mercy. They both have the same effect. One’s life is changed forever.

The paralyzed man in this gospel story neither asks for forgiveness nor for healing. Jesus, however, bestows both gifts upon him. Jesus sees him and responds with love and compassion. He offers him both forgiveness and healing. The man’s faith never comes up in the conversation. The faith of his friends and the doubts of some of those in the crowd are mentioned, but the salvation received by the paralyzed man does not depend on how much faith he demonstrated. It depends only on how much love Jesus demonstrates for him.

We are sometimes tempted to believe that we must do something to earn salvation. We have a hard time believing that God could forgive or heal us. We believe that we are not worthy of such grace. Yet God’s grace is freely bestowed on us, as well. When we recognize the great love of God for us, we too can get up and move forward in our relationship to God and to those around us. We, too, can then stand in awe and say “We have never seen anything like this!”

Practice Forgiving – Matthew 18:21-22

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Peter thought he was being magnanimous by offering to forgive someone seven times. In the culture of the time, many who heard this would think that Peter was offering to forgive someone once a day since there are seven days in a week. However, Jesus demands more of his followers. He calls them to forgive seventy-seven times [or in some translations seventy time seven times]. How could anyone keep track of that much forgiveness?

I had a friend who told a story of forgiveness in her own life. She had been married to a sailor for over twenty years. Since he was at sea most of the time, they only actually spent a few months together every year. When he retired from the Navy, neither of them were used to being around one another that much. They quickly grew apart, and he found another, younger woman, and left his wife behind as he began a new life with a new wife.

For many years, she had hated her ex-husband for what he had done. She felt betrayed and couldn't imagine ever forgiving him for what he had done. Then one day. After confessing her anger and bitterness to a priest in the sacrament of reconciliation, the priest asked her if she could ever forgive him. Of course she couldn't. So, the priest asked her to try something. "Every morning while getting ready to face a new day, turn to God and say, 'God bless Charlie.'" He told her this was not a penance. She was not required to do it. However, she might just want to try. The priest also

told her that she could not tell God how to bless Charlie. That would be up to God.

So, every morning, as she began her day, she would say out loud, “God bless Charlie.” At first it was a chore. Then it became a habit. Then one morning, after many months of saying “God bless Charlie,” she looked in the mirror and wondered when she had started to mean it. She had practiced forgiving Charlie by praying for him so often that one day she stopped practicing forgiveness and just forgave him. She had not intended to do so. It just happened, as she said, “by the grace of God.”

I don’t know about you, but when I was growing up, it was not uncommon for a parent to instruct a child to say “I’m sorry” to someone he or she hurt. It was also not uncommon for the parent to then insist that the offended child should say, “I forgive you.” Our parents taught us to practice forgiving, because sometimes we just don’t mean it the first time, and we have to do it over and over again until we get it right. Perhaps as often as seventy-seven times or maybe even as often as seventy times seven times.

How Did Jesus Treat Them? – Matthew 18:15-18

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.

But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

I once gave a retreat to a group of preachers. One of the activities I asked the group to do was to get into small groups, read an assigned scripture passage, and then look for what would be the challenge in that passage. One of the small groups was assigned this passage. After the exercise was over, we took a break. One of the participants came up to me and said, “I think I hate you.” I asked her why, and she told me this story.

“My husband and I were very active in the Church. We were part of an intentional faith community for a number of years. Then he had an affair. First, I went to him to seek reconciliation, but he was unwilling to change the situation. So, I invited one of his closest friends to join me in confronting him about his behavior, hoping he would have a change of heart. When that didn’t work, I brought the whole situation to our intentional faith community. Nothing changed. So, I gave up. We got divorced, and as far as I was concerned, he had condemned himself. He was no longer worthy of my care or concern, let alone my love and affection. I had treated him the way I imagined Jesus would want us to treat him. Then someone in the group pointed out that the author of this gospel had been a tax collector. He asked our group a simple question, ‘How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors?’

“Now, I’m being challenged to treat my ex-husband the way Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors. He treated them with compassion and mercy.”

A few years later, she invited me to preach a parish mission at the parish where she ministered. She told me she had forgiven me, but more importantly she had forgiven her ex-husband. Then she told me that once she had forgiven him a burden had been lifted. She was no longer bitter but could love again. First of all, she could love the man who had betrayed her, not in the same way she had before, but in a new way that did not always and only see him as the one who had betrayed and abandoned her for another woman. At the same time, she could love other people in a new way as well. Her heart was healed and once again open to loving others as Jesus was calling her to. She could begin once again to treat others as Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors.

Lost and Found – Matthew 18: 12-13, Luke 15:1-32

What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were

grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable:

“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no

one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine

is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

Jesus begins this series of stories with a simple question, “Which one of you... does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness?” We have heard this story so often, and none of us is likely to have a hundred sheep, that we forget what the answer is. The answer is quite simply, only a crazy person would leave the ninety-nine untended in a place where they might be attacked, wander off or be stolen. And only a crazy person would then throw a feast where a man who owns sheep would most certainly be expected to serve lamb to his guests.

What woman who lost one silver coin would throw a feast that probably costs more than one silver coin in order to celebrate what was lost has been found? Only a fool would do such a thing.

And what father would give his younger son half of the estate before he died just because he asked for it? Wouldn't an ordinary father be insulted by the request? And when the son left, wouldn't a sensible man consider such a son to be as good as dead to him even if he hadn't given him half the estate? The father in this third story is just as much a fool as the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine in the wilderness or the woman who spends more than what was lost to celebrate what was found. And Jesus seems to be implying that God is such a fool.

Both sons seem to think that their father is a fool. The younger son thinks that his father is both foolish enough to give him what he does not yet deserve and that he will welcome him back home. The younger son even practices what he will say in order to ingratiate himself to his father once again.

The older son, on the other hand, thinks that his father is a fool for giving his younger son anything to begin with, let alone to welcome him back into his home with a feast. The older son can only imagine that his younger brother has come back for more, which means that when his father finally does die, he will inherit even less of the estate than what he was originally entitled to.

The Pharisees and the scribes would have considered these stories to be blasphemous. God is no fool! How could Jesus compare God to such people? Blasphemy! Ultimately, Jesus would be charged in the Sanhedrin with the crime of blasphemy. These three stories may have been what started the process.

I don't know about you, but I am glad that God is just foolish enough to be merciful toward me. Like the older son, I don't always want God to be so merciful to others, but it sure is nice when God is merciful to me, especially when I am underserving of God's mercy.

An Unexpected Visitor – Luke 19:1-10

[Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector

and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

When I was a child, I learned that forgiveness involved four steps: contrition, confession, satisfaction and absolution. First one had to be sorry for one’s sins. Then one had to confess them. After that one had to do penance to prove that one was truly sorry, and then, and only then would one be forgiven.

Jesus must not have read the Baltimore Catechism. At least in the story of Zacchaeus, forgiveness comes first. Then, in light of the mercy received, Zacchaeus recognizes his sinfulness and promises to make things better for all who may have been hurt by it. Jesus does not demand confession, contrition or satisfaction first. He offers forgiveness first and then waits to see the results, and the

results are profound. Zacchaeus is a changed man. It is the experience of mercy that leads to the conversion of heart, not the other way around.

For centuries, Catholic Christians have lives as though they needed to do something in order to deserve mercy. The heresy of Jansenism has been alive and well in our Church. We've made it seem as if mercy and forgiveness are rewards for a good life. We acted as if the Son of Man came to seek out and save only those who had already reformed their lives and were thus worthy of redemption. The story of Zacchaeus and his encounter with the Lord should give us hope, for we are saved, not by what we have done, but by what Christ has done for us.

Zacchaeus was not expecting Jesus to stop and call him down from his perch in the sycamore tree. He was not expecting a house guest. He was not expecting Jesus to look at him with such compassion and concern. Jesus didn't expect to stay overnight in Jericho. He had planned to continue on the way. But Jesus was moved by Zacchaeus and his curiosity. He was so moved that he invited himself into Zacchaeus' home.

None of us expect Jesus to just show up, to call us by name, or to invite himself into our homes and our lives. We often believe that we need to be the ones who invite Christ into our lives rather than the other way around. However, God shows up when God chooses to do so, and God call us by name and invites God's self into our lives when God

sees it as an opportune time. And an opportune time is not dictated by us. It does not depend on when we're ready to receive Christ into homes and our lives. It may in fact be while we are still sinners that "the Son of Man seeks and finds what is lost."

Excusing the Sin – Luke 23:33-34a

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

Have you ever met a person willing to make excuses for the bad behavior of another? Or have you ever made excuses for your own bad behavior?

Jesus makes an excuse for what others are doing to him – they don't know what they are doing. Yet it seems clear that they did know what they were doing. They were crucifying the one who had been drawing a crowd and exciting them about the kingdom that was about to come. This was a threat to those in power. They wanted the old kingdom to remain, so that they could remain in power. They knew exactly what they were doing. They were getting rid of this troublemaker once and for all, or so they thought.

However, Jesus, even then, is full of mercy and compassion. Even while enduring the humiliation, the pain and agony of crucifixion showed mercy to those who were inflicting him with such torture. Jesus makes an excuse for them and calls on the Father to forgive.

Even when we know what we are doing is wrong, Jesus makes an excuse for us and calls upon the Father to forgive our sins.

Not to Condemn but to Forgive – John 3:16

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Jesus summarizes his entire mission with this one sentence spoken to Nicodemus. Nicodemus was confused by what Jesus had been saying. He didn't understand what Jesus was all about. So, Jesus gave him this simple summary of what he was all about. In many ways, this is the most famous single sentence in the gospels.

Neither Do I Condemn You – John 8:1-11

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

The woman caught in adultery never confesses her guilt or claims her innocence. She simply stands before the Lord awaiting her punishment. At first Jesus seems to ignore her, but it is her sin that he ignores. It is not important to Jesus. A woman is standing before Jesus. She has been condemned by those around her. She seems to be guilty. She says nothing until Jesus speaks directly to her. And what he offers her is freedom and mercy, not condemnation and punishment. She is free to go, her sin has been forgiven.

Those who brought her before Jesus were using her as a prop in their little plan to see if he would contradict the law of Moses or not. She was not important to them. Her sin was not that important to them either. All they wanted was to see how Jesus would respond. In front of the crowd, he said nothing about her or her sin. He simply reminded them that they were all sinners, one way or another.

We don't know what he wrote on the ground. Did he write their sins down? Did he write their names down? Maybe he wrote down words of scripture, reminding those who could see what had been written about God's mercy.

Or maybe he was just doodling in the dirt. We'll never know for sure. But this much we know, no one who was there dared to throw the first stone. All knew that they were unworthy of that.

I am convinced that this woman ultimately became a disciple of the Lord. The reason I say this is simple. Only Jesus and the woman knew what was said or what happened once everyone had left them alone. The only way the gospel author could know this story is if she had told someone what had happened. And she must have told it with such gratitude and devotion that the story got passed on until finally it was written down and became part of the gospel.

CONCLUSIONS

We are people reconciled by the grace of God. For many years, for many people, reconciliation with God seemed to be something we needed to do. We needed to be sorry for our sins. We needed to make amends for what we had done wrong. We needed to prove to God that we were worthy of God's mercy. The scriptures present us with a vastly different image of what reconciliation looks like.

The fact that we are in need of God's mercy, forgiveness or reconciling grace is not in doubt. The fact is that we are sinners. We have disobeyed the author of life, the creator of all things visible or invisible. We have not been perfect in the way we relate to God or to God's creation, especially to our fellow human beings. We are broken. Our relationships are broken. Reconciliation is needed.

However, repeatedly, the scriptures remind us that God is the One that seeks reconciliation first. We often think that we start it all by asking for forgiveness, by confessing our sins, by looking for ways to grow closer to God. Yet even these actions and attitudes all come through the grace of God.

Reconciliation is first and foremost the work of God. God calls us to be God's beloved. God loved us first. God sent Jesus, the Son of God, to heal and redeem, to reconcile and bring us into closer union with God.

Often times, when we look at the sacrament of reconciliation, we act as if it is all about our sins. We focus on the confession of our sins. However, I believe that the sacrament of reconciliation is always a celebration first and foremost about God's mercy. We are invited to confess our faith in God's unbounded mercy. God's mercy is always stronger than our sins. If reconciliation is all about our sins, then we really have nothing to celebrate. If, on the other hand, it is about God's mercy, there is plenty to celebrate.

Not only that, but the sacrament of reconciliation is also not just about me and my relationship with God, it is also about us and our relationships with one another. Sometimes, we as individuals have not been estranged from God and God's creation, but we as a people have been. All of humanity needs to be reconciled to all of creation, as Pope Francis reminds us in *Laudato Si*.

Sometimes nations need to be reconciled to one another. Sometimes people within nations or beyond nations

need to be reconciled. Sometimes the systems of government or economies are unjust, especially to the poor, and there is need for reconciliation. At those times, only God can begin the transformation that is necessary to create a more just society. That, however, does not leave us off the hook. There are things we can do to begin the process or at least to participate in the process that leads us to a more just society, a world order, that approaches the vision of the Kingdom of God that Jesus has proclaimed.

Throughout salvation history God has sent us prophets who call us to that just society, that kingdom where God reigns, where all are reconciled to one another and all live in just relationships with one another. The spirituality of the Precious Blood calls us to that kind of reconciliation.

We are people reconciled to God through the blood of Christ establishing a new covenant, poured out for us on the cross, and shared with us in eucharistic cup of salvation.

PEOPLE OF THE LAMB ONCE SLAIN

We are people of the Lamb once slain who lives forever. The lamb of God reigns over us. The lamb once slain gives us hope in the midst of darkness. The lamb once slain reminds us that death does not have a final word, but that God does. Life triumphs over death in Jesus Christ. The lamb once slain is an image of the Christ who died and rose that we might do the same.

The image of the lamb once slain reminds us that our spirituality does not end on the cross, but that it leads us to eternal life, to life beyond death, to a place in the heavenly kingdom where we will stand with all the saints in glory.

As people who follow the lamb once slain, we are always people of hope. We do not despair, no matter how hopeless the situation might seem.

One of the oldest icons of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood is the image of the lamb once slain standing upon a book with seven ribbons, seven seals. The image comes from the book of Revelation and was meant to be a sign of hope to a persecuted people. The lamb once slain lives again.

OLD TESTAMENT IMAGES

The image of the lamb once slain who lives does not exist in the Hebrew Scriptures. The closest images I can think of are the scapegoat, the paschal lamb and the bronze serpent. So, I will share a few passages about them here.

The Scapegoat – Leviticus 16:20-22, 29-31, 34

When he has finished atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.

This shall be a statute to you forever: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall deny yourselves, and shall do no work, neither the citizen nor the alien who resides among you. For on this day

atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the LORD. It is a sabbath of complete rest to you, and you shall deny yourselves; it is a statute forever.

This shall be an everlasting statute for you, to make atonement for the people of Israel once in the year for all their sins. And Moses did as the LORD had commanded him.

This passage from Leviticus instructs the people of Israel how to celebrate what today would be called the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur. It is an annual day of fasting and prayer, a time of repentance for all the sins committed during the previous year. The priest of the temple takes the sins of all the people and places them on the live goat. Unlike the usual sin offerings at the temple, the animal is not slain or sacrificed upon the altar. It is not eaten in a feast that unites God and God's people. It takes the sins of the people away, never to be seen again.

For many Christians throughout history, this is an image of the Christ. Jesus is the perfect scape goat who takes away the sins of the people once and for all. However, unlike Christ, the scape goat does not return triumphant. It dies alone in the desert and is never seen again. It is, therefore, an incomplete symbol, a less than perfect icon of the Christ, who takes upon himself the sins of his people, but returns sinless and alive to remind us that we, too, will one day share in his eternal life.

The Passover Lamb – Exodus 12:21-28

Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, “Go, select lambs for your families, and slaughter the passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood in the basin. None of you shall go outside the door of your house until morning. For the LORD will pass through to strike down the Egyptians; when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over that door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you down.

You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children. When you come to the land that the LORD will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance.

And when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this observance?’ you shall say, ‘It is the passover sacrifice to the LORD, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.’” And the people bowed down and worshiped. The Israelites went and did just as the LORD had commanded Moses and Aaron.

The Passover lamb is the lamb that was slain in order to give life to the Chosen People. While the angel of death visited throughout Egypt, those whose homes were marked with the blood of the Passover lamb were passed over. Death did not touch them.

This lamb that was slain actually gave identity to a people who had simply been slaves in Egypt. Now they

were God's Chosen People. They were set free from slavery, free to live a new identity, free to become a holy nation, God's own people.

The power of this symbol was so important that even when the angel of death was not lurking about, the people of Israel were to celebrate this feast, to remember this night forever. The Passover lamb was indeed the lamb of God whose blood worked wonders for God's Chosen People.

The Bronze Serpent – Numbers 21:5-9

The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Once again, this is an imperfect image, but it is an image that reveals part of what the image of the lamb once slain might reveal for us.

The bronze serpent, in this case, is a sign of hope for the people. They have sinned, and serpents have become a sign

of their sinfulness and the just punishment their sin deserves. However, the bronze serpent, an inanimate representation of a living serpent, is now the sign of God's mercy. While this particular serpent has never lived, it has the power to save. To look upon it is enough.

The symbolism of the serpent on the pole has been used for centuries as a symbol for the medical profession. It is a symbol for healing, for in this scripture passage, those who look upon it are healed.

The lamb once slain who lives also has the power to save, to heal whatever needs healing. It is, however, not an inanimate object. It is alive with the power of God.

**A Lamb Led to Slaughter – Isaiah 53:7,
Jeremiah 11:19**

But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. And I did not know it was against me that they devised schemes, saying, "Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will no longer be remembered!"

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

Isaiah and Jeremiah describe the suffering servant "like a lamb led to slaughter." This image was often used by the Fathers of the Church to describe what Jesus did for us during his passion and death upon the cross.

NEW TESTAMENT IMAGES

Christ: The Paschal Lamb – 1 Corinthians 5:7b

For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed.

Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians makes a passing remark, calling Christ the paschal lamb. Christ is the lamb slain so that the people might be saved.

Christ: Like a Lamb – 1 Peter 1:18-19

You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.

The people to whom Peter is writing would have immediately recognized the connection between the Precious Blood of Jesus and the blood of the Passover lamb. Just as the Hebrew slaves had been “ransomed from the futile ways inherited from their ancestors,” so we are ransomed, too, by the Precious Blood of Jesus. Jesus is thus portrayed as the Passover lamb, “a lamb without defect or blemish.” This lamb is not described as dead or slaughtered, but as a lamb that seems to be fully alive, “without defect or blemish.”

A Lamb Standing – Revelation 5:6-14

Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right

hand of the one who was seated on the throne. When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

They sing a new song: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.”

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped.

In his visions of a new heaven and a new earth, John sees the Lamb of God. John sees this “Lamb standing as if it has been slaughtered,” but it is clearly alive. The four living creatures and the elders all worship the Lamb. Angels join in the chorus, praising the Lamb.

This is clearly no ordinary lamb. This Lamb is praised at one and the same time as the “one seated on the throne.” The Lamb and God are identified with one another, with equal dignity, glory and honor.

This is the first mention of the lamb once slain who lives. It occurs in a vision that was meant to give hope to people who had already seen the destruction of the Temple and the holy city of Jerusalem. They had seen the slaughter of martyrs who died for their faith. They may have been afraid of what might still be coming. However, John has a vision unlike anything anyone could hope for or imagine. It is clear that the Lamb had been slaughtered, but it was just as clear that the Lamb was standing alive before the throne of God. It was also clear the elders of the people, along with all the heavenly hosts recognized the divinity of the Lamb.

No one expected to see a lamb once slain standing alive and well. No one expected to see a lamb standing before the throne of God with equal dignity. Isaiah has had visions of a lamb being led to slaughter, but this was clearly much more than anything Isaiah could have imagined.

Standing before the Lamb – Revelation 7:9-14

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

As John’s vision continues, he sees two crowds: one having 144,000 people from every tribe of Israel, the other so vast that no one could count them. We are those who are part of that second crowd. We stand before the throne and the Lamb. We worship and praise our God “who is seated on the throne and the Lamb.” Angels join us in giving praise to our God. We are those “who have endured the great ordeal and “have washed [our] robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

When we see ourselves in that crowd, when we imagine ourselves standing before the throne and the Lamb, when we realize that we are among those who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb, then we can face any ordeal with hope in the power of God who has made us part of that crowd.

This vision gave hope to the early Christians who wondered what would ultimately happen to them. They

had seen the destructive power of the Romans and witnesses the martyrdom of many of their fellow believers. John's vision assures them that destruction and persecutions in this life are not the end of the story. No matter what sufferings they may endure, they will one day stand before the throne and Lamb with countless others who have endured the great ordeal.

This vision can also be a sign of hope for us who face trials and tribulations in this life only if we see ourselves in that crowd.

When I was a child, I failed third grade twice. So, I spent two school years and a summer in third grade. I was told I was a failure, and I began to believe it. Three years later, my family moved to a new neighborhood, and I attended a new school. There, no one knew that I had been a failure. There, I began to be treated like any other kid. There, I began to believe that there was more to me than my past failures. By the end of the year, I was one of the top students in my grade, all because I began to see myself differently.

When we see ourselves not only as sinners, but also as those who are part of that vast crowd in John's vision, it can change our lives. When we truly believe that we are already redeemed, washed in the blood of the lamb, then we can begin to truly live as the saints God intended us to be. A change in attitude can make a great difference, not only in how we see ourselves, but in how we live because we see ourselves differently.

The City of God – Revelation 21:10, 22-23

And in the spirit [the angel] carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

In his final vision, John describes the heavenly Jerusalem, a city of great beauty lit only by the light of God from the lamp of the Lamb. The Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, gives light to the new Jerusalem. In the end, we do not stand before the Temple of the Lord, we stand before the very presence of God. We see God face to face, and in that awesome beauty all our questions, all our doubts, all the darkness that may surround us in this life disappears in the radiance of God's light.

GOSPEL IMAGES

Jesus, the Lamb of God - John 1:29, 35-36

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"

The same John, or perhaps a different one, who had multiple visions of the Lamb of God, early in his gospel tells

us that John the Baptist refers to Jesus as the Lamb of God. It is, in fact, according to John, that the first disciples come to follow Jesus because John has pointed him out to them as the Lamb of God. One of those disciples was Andrew, and he told his brother Simon what he had seen and heard, and together they would follow him the rest of their lives.

Whenever we gather at the table of the Lord, the priest repeats John's message, "Behold the Lamb of God." Then, we not only behold him, but we also take him into our very bodies as we eat his Body and drink his Blood. Unlike Andrew and the other disciple of John who went to see where this Lamb of God dwelled, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world comes to dwell in us. When we eat his Body and drink his Blood, the Lamb of God finds a dwelling place in us. We become the very place where God is at work in the world.

Can we look in the mirror and say to ourselves, "Behold the Lamb of God?" Can we look at everyone else who receives the Eucharist, and say, "Behold the Lamb of God?" When we see ourselves and our fellow Christians as the presence of Christ in the world, when we see the Lamb of God in ourselves and all around us, then we can really be a people of hope. Then we can see that the Lamb of God is not simply a vision of some distant future or the dream of one of the disciples long ago but is alive and present in our world today.

CONCLUSIONS

We are people in the crowd that gathers around the Lamb once slain who lives. Though we know that like that Lamb we will one day die, we also know that because of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world we shall also live forever. We shall stand before the throne of God, not because we are worthy, but because our robes have been washed in the blood of the Lamb.

The Lamb once slain gives us hope that one day we will live in the new Jerusalem, in the heavenly kingdom, where God will be our light, so radiant that there is no need for sun or electric lights. Though we may only see the darkness around us now, the Lamb will be our lamp. Though death may seem inevitable, life with God will triumph.

We, therefore, are people of hope. St. Paul tells us that: We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Romans 8:22-25)

We have that hope because of the vision God has for us, the vision shared with prophets and evangelist, the vision of the Lamb once slain who lives!



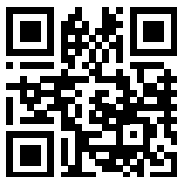
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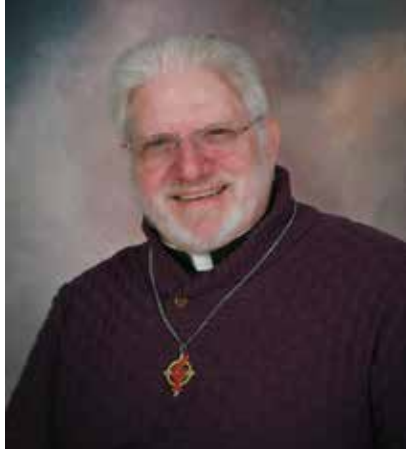
Missionaries of the Precious Blood priests, brothers, and lay associates follow God's call in the tradition of our founder, St. Gaspar del Bufalo, to serve the people of God in ways that will invigorate God's Church with a focus on mission and ministry.

Jesus Christ has redeemed all people with his blood. It is our mission to heal and restore relationships in the church and the world. The Precious Blood spirituality is a way of life that brings people closer to God, each other, and creation through the healing power of the blood of Christ.

Learn more at www.preciousbloodus.org.

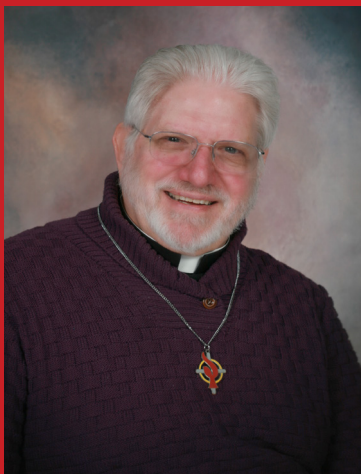


ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rev. Dennis Chriszt, C.P.P.S., has been a Missionary of the Precious Blood and a Catholic priest for over forty years, serving seventeen years in three different parishes and twenty years as a formation director for future members of the congregation. He has a Doctor of Ministry degree with a concentration in liturgy, focusing especially on the Christian Initiation of Adults. He has been on the advisory committee for the International Center for the Spirituality of the Precious Blood and serves as the director of Precious Blood Parish Missions. For more information see Dennis-Chriszt-CPPS.org and Precious-Blood-Parish-Missions.org.

A contemporary spirituality of the Precious Blood is rooted in the Sacred Scriptures and five primary images that come out of the Word of God: Covenant, Cross, Cup, Reconciliation, and the Lamb once slain who lives. This book contains a series of reflections/stories inspired by various scripture passages and arranged according to the five images that proclaim God's abundant love for us.



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