

PRECIOUS BLOOD DEVOTION THROUGH THE CENTURIES

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Summary of the article

1. From the origins of Christianity, the Precious Blood of our redemption was an object of devotion. The inspired books, the writings of the Fathers of the Church, and the early Christian art of the catacombs offer both implicit and explicit witness to this. The essence of this devotion is made explicit in the Eucharistic sacrifice, center of the piety and of the spiritual life of Christians in the first centuries.
2. With the spread of the Church among the peoples of the northern and northeastern areas of Europe, there was an evolution in the basic liturgical practice regarding devotional forms that were significant and varied. In the Middle Ages, devotions grew up and developed. Especially notable were those directed toward the humanity of Christ, devotion to the Precious Blood occupied a place of preeminence among them. This is evident in the literature and art of the epoch, which took the great truths of the Scriptures and of the Fathers regarding the sacrifice of blood and presented them in ways that were simple and immediately understandable by the faithful. The widespread veneration of relics of the holy cross, of the instruments of the passion, and of the very blood of Calvary gave momentum to this devotion, even if some of the miraculous effusions of blood took place in images of the Crucified Christ or in the consecrated species. The church authors of this epoch developed the theological and mystical aspects of the devotion. The most important of those authors are St. Albert the Great, St. Bonaventure, and St. Catherine of Siena.

3. In the 15th century, two famous theological controversies occasioned an abundance of literature on this topic. The first centered around the possibility of the existence of relics of the Precious Blood that originated from Calvary. The second concerned the union of the blood with the person of Jesus during the three days after the death of the Savior. The unfortunate schism within the Church took place in that century, the result of the Protestant Reformation. In the regions where Protestantism flourished, devotion to the Precious Blood was not extinguished completely, even though it was greatly diminished. It continued, and continues even now, to nourish the vital fervor of non-Catholic Christians. In the climate of the Catholic Reformation, many confraternities and religious congregations under the title of the Precious Blood arose in various parts of the Catholic world, especially in places where important relics were venerated. They did not last long. From the 16th century on, we encounter the first papal documents that establish offices (the Liturgy of the Hours) in honor of the Precious Blood; moreover, already for some time there were celebrations in the sanctuaries where this devotion was established, as in Bruges, Mantua, and Venice. It was Pope Benedict XIV who had the office and the Mass of the divine blood composed for the diocese of Sarzana in 1747 and then offered to other diocese and families of religious.

4. Despite the best initiatives of fervent souls, the majority of the faithful became estranged from the devotion to the blood of Christ. This came to be considered proper to individual spiritual practice, barely accessible to the many, as if it were the gift of privileged souls. The spirit of Jansenism contributed more than a little to this decline in the 17th and 18th centuries. It was spread in large part by the clergy, with disastrous effects on Christian piety. But in the 19th century, St. Gaspar Del Bufalo became the

tireless apostle of this devotion, and he succeeded in creating a lasting and growing movement of piety around this noble mystery of the divine blood. His principal contribution was preaching the devotion to the masses in a simple format, assigning practical means for cultivating it, and establishing religious organizations to spread it everywhere after his death.

On the initiative of the Servant of God Giovanni Merlini, the second successor of St. Gaspar in the administration of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, Pope Pius IX extended the liturgical feast of the blood of Christ to the entire Church with a decree of August 10, 1849. During the 19th century and into the present day, this devotion has spread more and more, penetrating the religious consciousness. Evidence of this is found in the abundant literature on this theme, both scientific or devotional and parenetic in nature, the worldwide development of pious unions and confraternities of the faithful, and the multiplication of religious institutes (no fewer than 15 to date) that have joined to those founded directly by St. Gaspar, in the same devotional and apostolic spirit.

THE CULT OF THE PRECIOUS BLOOD IN THE EARLY CHURCH

From the origins of Christianity, the blood and body of the Lord was an object of devotion Holy Eucharist. This is indisputable. Our task, however, is to see if the religious piety of the first Christians reveals a special attention to the Precious Blood; that is, if it had a distinctive or prominent place in their spirituality, if it was honored by a particular veneration. We will examine a variety of witnesses from those early days.

In the inspired books

Blood clearly has an emotional connotation. In the New Testament, it is called “the Precious Blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. (1 Pt 1:17–19); the blood of God’s beloved Son (cf. Eph 1:6-7); “his own blood” (cf. Acts 20:28). These references affirm that the shedding of that blood is the unique means of our salvation (Hb 9:22), the source of all our good (Rom 8:32), a sacred object par excellence (Heb 10:29). The New Testament points out that the blood of Christ is the clearest demonstration of the love of God and Christ for us. It is the most effective motivation for us to pursue a life that is truly worthy of our Christian vocation. Logically, does this not mean that the writer has a special veneration for this sublime object, and that he encourages such veneration in his readers? It is difficult to deny this, especially if this is located in the context of the texts in which the sacred humanity of Christ is presented as an object of adoration. For example, Phil 2:8-10: “he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him... so that at the name of Jesus... every knee should

bend... and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” Or Heb 1:6: “Let all God’s angels worship him” and so on.

Moreover in Revelation, St. John puts a genuine and fitting hymn in the mouths of the blessed, who bless Jesus Christ as the Lamb “standing as if it had been slaughtered,” because his Precious Blood was shed for their redemption: “And they sang a new song, saying:

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” (Rev 5:9-10).

Now we know that the first Christians sang praises to the Lord in their worship assemblies, and St. Paul exhorts them to praise and give thanks to God “with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” (Col 3:16; Eph 5:19-20; 1 Cor 14:15-20). The object of such songs was certainly Christ himself, “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (cf. Eph 5:19-20; Col 3:16), as the Apostle says. It is a custom that continued subsequently, and the pagan Pliny the Younger can write to the Emperor Trajan, about 112 C.E., that the Christians of Bithynia “were accustomed to gather before dawn, and sing a hymn to Christ as to a god.”¹

Many scholars hold that the hymn recorded in Revelation was one of those already in use in the early liturgical assemblies of the Church, and that the sacred author simply incorporated it into his writing.² The same could be said of the famous Christological text of the letter to the Philippians quoted above, which is in fact a hymn

¹ Letters X, 96

² Cf. Siegman, *op. cit.*, 33-34.

in meter in which the divine origin of Christ is sung, his humiliation “even to death and death on a cross” and his consequent glorification: “because of this God exalted him.” If the opinion of scholars is correct, these would be the most ancient hymns of the Church that we are aware of, and both are hymns in honor of the blood of Christ.

But whatever the opinions of exegetes, we know with certainty that the Pauline letters and the Revelation of John quickly became part of the tradition of the liturgical assemblies, and it is not stretching the truth to think that for the first believers they must have spontaneously repeated and sung the exalted words of the Christological hymn and made the praises of the immolated Lamb resound on earth as did the blessed in heaven. The emotion and enthusiasm for the divine blood that came from the heart of the Apostle to the gentiles and the other Apostle “whom Jesus loved” must have been infectious.

In the writings of the Fathers of the Church

From reading the Fathers of the Church, it is clear that the theme of the blood of Christ had a place of special preeminence in the minds of the faithful and in their moral life. We have already noted that the Precious Blood was always spoken of along with its miraculous attributes, with great spontaneity of language, without the need to offer justification, and without any note of controversy. It was a reality mentioned by all, admitted by all, venerated by all, even by the heretics themselves. Moreover, as in sacred Scripture, the Fathers resort to the blood as the most decisive and effective argument for exhorting the faithful to an upright and virtuous life. They use titles for the blood that are very venerable and moving. This is an implicit but eloquent witness of the devotion that existed among Christians. It tells us that the hearers and readers had to be

profoundly moved by this argument, as by a pressing appeal to something that is most dear and holy in their spiritual life. More explicit testimony is not lacking.

St. Clement of Rome (circa 100 CE,) in his first letter to the Corinthians, exhorts his readers to a special devotion to the Precious Blood with these words: “Let us look steadfastly to the blood of Christ, and see how precious that blood is to God which, having been shed for our salvation, has set the grace of repentance before the whole world.” He points out the beneficial fruits of the devotion: it nourishes in us a greater respect and veneration for Christ himself: “Let us honor the Lord Jesus Christ whose blood was sacrificed for us.” This kindles a more fervent love for God and for the neighbor, “because out of the love that our Lord Jesus Christ felt for us, he gave his blood for us, according to the will of God.” This stirs us “to abandon empty and useless aspirations and to look to that which is pleasing to God.” The devotion sustains confidence of obtaining salvation, because that Precious Blood “brought to the whole world the grace of conversion.”

Another witness is St. Ignatius of Antioch (circa 110 CE). In his letter to the Philadelphians he greets them “in the blood of Christ” because “they exult firmly in the passion of our Lord.” What is this holy exultation if not a fervent love for the passion and blood of Jesus? The same conclusion can be drawn from a wonderful expression in the letter to the Smyrnaeans: “I know well that you have become perfect in the indestructible faith, as men and women nailed in body and spirit to the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, and confirmed in love by means of the blood of Christ.”

St. Justin, Origen, and others present the Precious Blood as the “banner of the Church.” It signifies that it must be honored and loved with the same dedication with which brave soldiers honor their military standard.

St. Athanasius, referring to the words of a bishop of Egypt, says: “Our sanctuaries are now, as they always have been, pure and adorned only by the blood of Christ and its devout cult.”

St. Gregory Nazianzen offers a clear witness. He is “passionate” for the blood of the Lord. In time of illness, one is consumed by the desire “to take part in the beautiful hymns in honor of the Precious Blood with devout prayers.” He passes on his ardor to the faithful: “We will sing the praises of the Son, venerating the blood which was the expiation of our sins.” He teaches the spirit of true devotion to the blood of Jesus, which consists in imitating the virtues that the Lord showed in shedding his blood and especially in accepting suffering and making it holy: “Let us accept everything out of love for God; with our sufferings let us imitate his sufferings; with our blood let us honor his blood, and let us joyfully ascend the cross. Sweet are the nails, even if they are very painful: because suffering with Christ and for Christ is better than a comfortable life with others.”

St. John Chrysostom was one of the most magnificent apostles of the devotion to the Precious Blood in antiquity. His homilies overflow with a holy enthusiasm when he touches on this topic. In his works he presents, with insuperable effectiveness, all the reasons why special devotion was due the blood of Christ, the price of our redemption, the blood of reconciliation, the cause of our existence, the pledge of our inheritance, the supreme expression of the love of God for us, and the strongest motive for our love for God and for our neighbor. On the altar, the blood of Christ continues the work of our sanctification, and there the faithful come “to drink right at the side” of Christ. There they approach that blood, “source of light and of truth, surrounded by adoring angels

who admire the beauty of its streams, because they, more clearly than us, appreciate the power that it has within it, and its dazzling rays.

St. Ambrose gives witness to his fervent devotion to the price of our ransom, with these notable and moving words: “Hail, noble and Precious Blood flowing from the wounds of my crucified Lord, washing away the sins of the whole world. Remember, Lord, your creature, whom you have redeemed with your blood! – Hail, O noble and Precious Blood, let it gush from the wounds of my Lord Jesus Christ crucified, and let it wash the sins of the entire world! Remember your creature, Lord, whom you have redeemed by your blood!”³ And with these same sentiments he was certainly inspiring his faithful: “Come, he says for example, in the comment on Psalm 118, come to that drink which inebriates the affections of the faithful... In such inebriation the soul rises from the dead and is consecrated.” Is not this holy inebriation of affections perhaps the true devotion to the blood of Christ?

St. Augustine is to the West what St. John Chrysostom is to the East on the theme of this devotion. In his writings he reveals a soul dominated by affectionate admiration for the blood of Christ, and he never misses an occasion to stir up a similar affection in the faithful. He insists on showing the grandeur of the love of Christ and the infinite value of the price given for us: “

Consider how our ransom took place: Christ hangs from the wood of the cross, see at what price he purchased [us]...he shed his blood, he purchased with his blood, with the blood of the spotless Lamb, with the blood of the only Son of God... The one who purchases is Christ, the price is his blood, his possession is the whole earth.” Honor full of gratitude and humility must be given by men and women “to their price.” Hence also the encouragement to celebrate it, similar to the tradition of the pagans, who had their feast in honor of the blood flowing

³ This part of a prayer that may be said before Mass attributed to St. Ambrose. It is found in the current edition of the *Roman Missal*.

from the earlobe of a woman if the blood exceeded the weight of her earring. Indeed, the celebration of the blood of Christ is greater: “if the blood of a woman was heavy enough to exceed the weight of gold, what power has the Lamb, by whom the world was made, to exceed the weight of the world?”

In early Christian art

The art of ancient Christianity provides us with interesting examples of a special piety toward the divine blood in the first centuries of the Church. The “discipline of the secret,” surrounded the most sacred matters of the faith with great secrecy in order to avoid a pretext for the errors and calumnies of the pagans. This generated a system of symbolism in art and in epigraphs in which we can glimpse the devotional sentiments that animated the first generations of Christians. It is worth our dwelling on this for a bit. We take as our guide the famous archaeologist Mariano Armellini (1852-1896).

The representation of the sacrifice of redemption and of the sacrifice of the altar dominates all the iconography of the catacombs.

The *cross*, emblem of the bloody immolation of Christ, in the earliest days was represented almost exclusively by the figure of an anchor, a trident, or with the Greek letter T, the swastika, and the monogram of Christ. The famous blasphemous caricature of the palace of the Caesars on the Palatine demonstrates indirectly the cult of the Crucified that existed in the Church of Rome in time of persecution, also witnesses to the insolence and disrespect that the cross and Christians were exposed to.⁴ For this reason, prudence, respect, and the fear of scandal inhibited the free display of this venerable sign. Nevertheless, some figures of the cross exist in its true form as early as the second

⁴ This is an allusion to a famous anti-Christian graffito, which shows a man with the head of an ass nailed to a cross. At his feet there is a man in an act of adoration, along with the Greek inscription: “Alexamenos adores his god.”

century. From the fourth century the cross became more common, at first the cross alone and later with the body of the Crucified.

In the catacombs, a *fish* (in Greek, *ICTHUS*), is often combined with the anchor or trident. The letters of *ICTHUS* correspond to the initial letters of the Greek phrase, “Jesus Christ, son of God, Savior.” That image was a genuine profession of faith. The fish sometimes takes the form of a dolphin, which from antiquity was considered to be the friend and savior of men and women. These are secret images of the Savior immolated on the cross.

Another symbol of the bloody sacrifice of Christ is the *Lamb*. Apart from pastoral scenes (in which the good shepherd is seen among the lambs and sheep), the lamb is undoubtedly a figure of our Lord, and it is intimately connected to the shedding of blood. Scripture and the Fathers always associate these two ideas: one thinks of Revelation in which the expression “blood of the lamb” is so dominant. That this was really meant by this symbol is confirmed in a beautiful synthesis of the fourth century, found in the basilica of San Felice in Nola. There we see a cross united with the mystical lamb, and under it this inscription: “Under the bloody cross stands Christ in the snow-white lamb.”

A sarcophagus of the fourth century presents the figure of *Adam and Eve*, and between them the divine Redeemer, who carries in his right hand a bundle of ears of wheat that he offers to Adam, and in the left hand a lamb that he offers to Eve. is a symbolic expression of the Precious Blood with which the future Messiah, “The Lamb slain from the origin of the world,” (Rev 13:8), would take away the sin introduced in the world by Eve (who is in a special way is promised a Savior), and in the Eucharist,

together with the transubstantiated bread (the ears of wheat) which would be given to the faithful.

The sacrifice of the altar in the catacombs is often represented by the *Eucharistic meal*. In a picture dating from before the middle of the second century in the cemetery of Priscilla, one sees Jesus who breaks the bread and has before him the *chalice of wine*: it is the classic *fractio panis*. In other scenes, those dining together are eating the symbolic roast fish, with reference to the breakfast on the shore of Lake Gennesaret (Jn 21:9), to the Eucharist and to Calvary, according to the famous phrase of St. Augustine: “*Piscis assus, Christus passus*”: the roast fish signifies Christ sacrificed. The famous epitaph of Abercio, from the second century, attests how popular this Eucharistic symbol was. It reads: “faith places before me a fish for food...once again offering an excellent wine.”

In one of the most ancient cubicles of the crypts of Lucina in the Catacombs of San Callisto), from the beginning of the second century, there are two representations of a large living fish ploughing through the water and carrying on its back a wicker basket in which is seen a glass half full of red wine. Above it there are five loaves of bread. This is a symbol of the Eucharist. An explanation may be found in the words of St. Jerome, who, speaking of a bishop who was reduced to poverty by giving aid to the poor, says: “No one, however, is richer than the one who brings the body of Christ in a basket of rushes, and his blood in a vessel of glass.” In the first centuries of Christianity the consecrated bread and wine were kept in just such receptacles since those were times of poverty and persecution.

The *sacrifice of Abraham* is one of the scenes often represented in the catacombs from the beginning of the second century. This surely symbolizes the sacrifice of the

Mass, where there is a victim but without the shedding of blood. This interpretation is supported in the writings of the Fathers. Sometimes, however, the scene represents the sacrifice of Calvary, indicating its dependence on that event. Thus, in a picture from the cemetery of Thecla we see Abraham who points out to Isaac a white lamb to Isaac on the mount above, near which is the altar of sacrifice. This is an unmistakable symbol of the immolation of the Redeemer and the shedding of his blood.

Other figurations refer particularly to the divine blood.

The *miracle of the wedding at Cana* is sometimes represented in early Christian art, and should certainly be interpreted in a Eucharistic sense, especially referring to the blood. The allusion of this miracle to the transubstantiation of wine into the blood of Christ is indicated by St. Cyril of Jerusalem:

Of old in Cana of Galilee, he changed water into wine of his own will. Is he less worthy of credence when he changes wine into blood? Called to an earthly marriage he performed that amazing miracle. Shall we not, then, confess all the more that on the children of the bridal chamber he has bestowed the enjoyment of his own body and blood?

Also alluding to this miracle, St. Cyprian observed that the wine represents the blood of Christ and the water represents the people. The mixing of the water and wine indicates that the assembly of believers is joined to the one in whom they believe. The mixture cannot be separated.

These two witnesses, one from the east and one from the west, show how widespread this symbolism was in the early Church. In fact, the scene of Cana can be seen both in the Roman catacombs and in a catacomb of Alexandria in Egypt (from the fourth century), with an obvious reference to the Eucharistic meal.

Another symbol is the *glass of milk*. In the same ancient cubicle of the crypts of Lucina, is a painting of a glass containing milk set upon a rustic altar, between two sheep, with a shepherd's staff next to it. The same glass is found in a nearby room, carried in the right hand of the good shepherd. In an ancient painting of the cemetery of Domitilla one sees a lamb, next to which is placed a shepherd's staff, from which hangs the glass of milk. In addition, in a fresco of the cemetery of Sts. Peter and Marcellino, the glass of milk is placed on the back of a lamb and is surrounded by a halo.

Now we know that milk in antiquity was taken as a symbol of the blood of Christ and of the Eucharist. This is mentioned by Clement of Alexandria in the *Paedagogus*. This is also supported by the authentic *Acts* of the martyr Perpetua, a document of the third century, where there is a description of a vision in which the saint received communion from the good Shepherd by means of milk, while they people responded: Amen. The altar on which it is placed, the union of a glass of milk with the lamb, which without doubt refers to Jesus the victim, the halo with which it is surrounded, are all elements that give weightier evidence to the meaning of this symbol: it is the Precious Blood, shed in sacrifice on Calvary and the life-giving drink given to Christians in the Mass.

The *vine and the bunch of grapes* are other symbols of the Precious Blood. They are found everywhere in early Christian art. Jesus Christ refers to himself as the true vine. With this hidden expression the first Christians pointed to the divine blood in the Eucharist. In fact, the prayer which was recited over the cup in gatherings for worship referred to in the very ancient *Didache* (90-100 CE) highlights the cup with these words: "We give you thanks, O our Father, for the holy vine of David." The holy Fathers saw in the fruit of the vine as corresponding to the Redeemer who gives his blood. Sometimes

the bunch of grapes is being pecked by a dove, symbol of the baptized soul. Thus, one must see an allusion to communion with the blood of Christ which produces immortality: “Let us drink the immortal blood of Christ...Around his chalice in order to be nourished by a drink of immortality,” says Firmicius Maternus. From this one can understand the profound significance of the expression that sometimes is joined to the dove: “*Bibe Deo*” which translates “drink of God.”

Finally, the *water that gushes from the rock*, struck by the staff of Moses, must be interpreted as a symbol of the Precious Blood. Archaeologists generally see this scene as a reference to grace and baptism, but these interpretations are later. The Fathers, like John Chrysostom, St. Jerome, and especially St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, see in the episode of the miraculous stream of water the flowing out of the blood of Christ, in particular from his side, basing this on the affirmation of St. Paul: “But the rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:4). St. Ambrose says: “Was not the water that came out of the rock a figure of the blood that flowed from Christ, so that they would drink and not suffer thirst, that they would be redeemed and not perish? ... For them water flowed from the rock; for you the blood of Christ. The water quenched their thirst for a time, but the blood washes you for eternity.” St. Augustine clearly explains why the miraculous water must signify the outpouring of blood on the cross: “If this rock had not been struck it did not contain water, but once struck, it produced springs and rivers. Christ, struck on the cross, issued forth the font of the New Covenant. If he had not been struck and if blood and water had not gushed from his side, the whole world would be dead of thirst.”

In early Christian art, the scene of *Moses striking the rock* is quite common. Generally, Moses is the only person in such representations, but in a sarcophagus of the fourth century one sees the people who are going to drink from the miraculous spring.

In a picture in the catacombs of San Callisto, in the cubicles of the sacraments, the image of a fisherman who is catching a little fish on a hook is joined to the scene of Moses striking the rock. This is a symbol of the Christian reborn in baptism. Nearby is the figure of a man who is baptizing a boy, and then the paralytic with his bed on his back, symbol of the sacrament of penance. The Fathers are unanimous in seeing the outpouring of blood and water that gushed from the side of Christ as an expression of baptism and of all the other sacraments on which the Church is founded and made holy: “The water and the blood present the symbol of baptism and of the mysteries on which the Church was founded,” says John Chrysostom. St. Augustine writes: “His side was open so that in a certain way the gate of life would be opened, from which emanate the sacraments of the Church, without which one does not enter into that life which is true life.”

In addition, one should note that sometimes there is a name on the head of the person who strikes the rock, but it is never “Moses” but “*Peter*.” This is to say that St. Peter was considered by the early Christians to be the Moses of the new covenant, to whom, as the supreme authority of the Church, was entrusted the font of salvation, that gushed from the side of Christ. This corresponds perfectly with the thought of the Fathers, who see in the blood and water from the side of Christ (the sacraments) the dowry offered by Christ to his mystical bridegroom.

These ideas have a wonderful confirmation in an exceptionally beautiful creation in glass preserved in the British Museum. There is a representation of the Chair of St. Peter, surmounted by the monogram of Christ. This is placed against the rock from which water is gushing, and on the peak of that rock an altar arises. The altar united to the rock clearly signifies the immolation of Christ from whom gushes the flow of blood,

fountain of supernatural life. The union of the Chair with the rock indicates that this fountain of life is entrusted to the authority of the Church, founded on the mystical cornerstone, Christ. Above this representation one could place as an inscription the phrase written many centuries later by Albert the Great: “The entire passion of Christ is placed under the power of the keys.”

The Precious Blood in Christian devotion in the first centuries

There are many implicit and explicit testimonies for a special devotion to the Precious Blood in the early Church – testimonies that become more frequent with the arrival of religious tolerance and as the Middle Ages approach. When considered against the cultic-liturgical background characteristic of the first centuries, more light is shed on them. Certainly, in those times we do not find the external manifestations of devotion as we are accustomed to today, such as the month in honor of the divine blood, hours of adoration, feasts, processions, and other functions. However, despite this, one can and must say that the core idea of devotion to the blood of Christ was no less prominent in the heart of Christians then than it is today.

We must recall that in antiquity, all the faithful were regularly admitted to communion of the chalice, and we have seen how according to St. Cyril of Jerusalem the rite ended with a sort of holy anointing, in order to consecrate the entire person with the blood of Christ.⁵ Thus, their attention must have been vividly impressed by this precious

⁵ *Catecheses* XXIII, 22: “... draw near also to the Cup of His blood; not stretching forth your hands, but bending, and saying with an air of worship and reverence, *Amen*, hallow yourself by partaking also of the blood of Christ. And while the moisture is still upon your lips, touch it with your hands, and hallow your eyes and brow and the other organs of sense. Then wait for the prayer, and give thanks unto God, who has accounted you worthy of so great mysteries”

object, in viewing the species of wine in which they were actually participating. But there is another consideration even more important.

In those first centuries practically the only form of public worship for the faithful was the sacrifice of the Mass. They knew of no other devotion besides this. Participation in offering such a sacrifice had to have in their mind and in their religious life an importance that was more than special: it was unique. For them, the Mass was not only the center of worship, as it always was and always will be. It was the only expression of devotional life known and officially acknowledged that included instruction of the mind and the union of hearts to Christ, in the fervor of songs and liturgical prayers. The absence of other religious or devotional manifestations made the Mass stand out in all its splendor and was the center of personal piety and the spiritual life of Christians.

Now what is the Mass if not the bloodless renewal of the shedding of the blood that Jesus accomplished on Golgotha? The altar is the Calvary that perpetuated through the centuries the sacrifice of the blood of Christ. Thus the entire public cult and personal piety of the faithful consisted in and was made explicit in adoring the shedding of the blood that was the source of our salvation: that blood, under the species of wine was, what's more, distributed to those present, always during the liturgy, so that they would participate intimately in the same sacrifice.

Therefore the cult of the Precious Blood or, if one prefers, the cult of Christ in the blood that he shed to redeem us (both expressions say the same thing), nourished all of religious life and the spirituality of the first Christian centuries through the intimate personal union to the sacrifice of blood, renewed on the altars. During the following centuries the relevant external forms for expressing the internal sentiments and cultivating them better would change, but the essence of the true piety toward the blood

of Christ will always be the one revealed to us by the golden age of Christian life, and under various manifestations, will remain always the same.

THE CULT OF THE PRECIOUS BLOOD IN THE MIDDLE AGES

The fall of the Roman Empire in the west and the incursion of peoples from the north and east within the borders of the ancient civilization profoundly changed the social conditions and created new needs and new approaches. With the conversion and entry of those people into the Church, this gradually determined a process of adaptation of the forms of worship to the needs of the new generations of Christians. The psychology of those new peoples who were somewhat unsophisticated, required manifestations of piety more immediate and more impressive, and thus easier to grasp their hearts. It was also perceived as useful to respond to the personal efforts of people on the way toward heaven in worship, and to help in this process with the spiritual necessities encountered in the that were being widely developed.

Thus, to the early and simple liturgical action was added a distinctly humanistic note with the affirmation of feasts recalling episodes in the life of Christ or of Mary, with the addition of texts, psalmody, processions, various ceremonies, in order to make more variable, more captivating, and more solemn exercise of worship. In sum, *devotions* arose which were born of the rich patrimony of early worship and which tended to develop them and place in greater prominence on or the other aspect of these.

In this spiritual climate devotion to the Precious Blood began to assume its own marked features, inserting them into the larger picture of devotion to the humanity of Christ, which was spread particularly by St. Bernard, St. Bonaventure, St. Gertrude the Great, and others.

Going forward from this point, the testimonies to our devotion become more numerous and consistent. It is impossible in a compendium study such as this to list all of them. We will be content therefore to glide through the grand panorama like a bird on the wing, lingering from time to time on a branch to catch our breath. In this way we will arrive at the modern age where, as we meet the distinguished apostle of the Precious Blood, St. Gaspar Del Bufalo, we will be obliged to stop and give our devoted attention to his work, to his institutions, and to the influence that he exerted on further development of the movement of spirituality and of study that in our own age is called the blood of Christ.

Returning to the Middle Ages, the most beautiful affirmations of particular piety to the blood of the Redeemer are offered to us: 1) by devotional and popular literature; b) by figurative art; c) by the cult of relics; and d) by the spiritual writers.

In devotional and popular literature

There is an abundance of hymns, sequences, and poetry that have been collected by Chevalier in his *Repertorium hymnologicum*. These were composed for use in the liturgy or to be sung in the so-called mystery plays and popular religious performances. This poetry is a lyrical elaboration of the theological truths expressed by St. Paul or by the Fathers, united with a charming simplicity and immediacy of expression. A hymn of praise by an unknown author, sometimes attributed to either St. Bonaventure or to St. Bernard, was remembered in a special way: “*Ave caput cruentatum* – Hail, bloody head!” as well as a characteristic litany hymn composed in the Monastery of Fécamp in France (12th century).

The *legend of the Holy Grail* contributed to the spread of devotion to the Precious Blood. The Grail, an object believed to have supernatural powers, was the cup which Jesus is believed to have used at the last supper. Joseph of Arimathea, after collecting the blood of Jesus as it dropped from him on the cross, carried with him to Great Britain, when he went there to evangelize that region. The legend of the Grail, which arose at the beginning of the 12th century, perhaps either in France or central Spain, spread quickly and entered into the poetic cycle of the Round Table. It gave origin to poems and popular sagas with an ethical and mystical background. The masterpiece of the genre was *Parzifal* by the poet Eschenbach (+1230) from which Wagner drew the theme of his immortal musical drama. Especially in German literature, the Grail becomes a symbol of purification and redemption, the goal of eager and arduous searches on the part of the knights, in whom was shown the perfect union of Christian and chivalrous ideals that was characteristic of that age. These found expression in the crusades, which were aimed at liberating the land bathed by the blood of Christ.

In figurative art

The plastic and figurative arts offer especially important witness to the spread of the devotion: miniatures, sculptures, pictures, and stained-glass windows. In them we see scenes and symbols treated in the Scriptures and by the Fathers, with profound theological significance.

The *Crucifix* is represented, from the 9th century, with a *chalice* placed at the feet, in which the Precious Blood is collected. This signifies that the sacrifice of Calvary and that of the altar are identical. In Byzantine and Slavic art, the same concept is expressed

even more forcefully in the painting of great basilica. In the center of the painting an altar has been prepared with a chalice atop. Above there is a representation of the scene of Calvary with the Madonna and St. John. The blood of Christ falls from his wounded side into the chalice placed on the altar.

From the same epoch onward, there are representations of the *Crucifix with the Church* at the side. The Church has in hand a chalice which is proffered to collect the blood that flows from Christ's side. The meaning is evidently that the Church is born from the blood of Christ and it also has become the dispenser of that blood in the sacrifice of the Mass. This symbolism is even more pronounced when the Church is matched on the left side with the figure of the Synagogue. The latter turns its head to avoid seeing the victim, but the former, the mystical spouse of Christ, is turned toward the wounded side.

A similar ancient figure is that of the *Crucifix with the skull of Adam* placed at its feet, on which the blood of redemption is falling. This communicates that the blood of the new Adam, Jesus Christ, takes away the sin the old Adam introduced into the world. It was believed, according to St. Jerome, that the progenitor of the human race had been buried near the place where Christ was crucified, and that place was called "place of the skull" (Golgotha or Calvary), precisely because the skull of the first man was found there. Sometimes, to indicate the victory over death Adam is pictured as rising from the earth upon contact with the Precious Blood, extending his arms to the Savior. Sometimes a chalice is placed in the hands of Adam rising, to indicate that the work of redemption continues in the Mass.

In the crucifixion scene, sometimes the blood is collected by Joseph of Arimathea in the cup of the Holy Grail. More often, however, the angels standing in an act of

adoration receive the blood from the wounds of the hand, feet, and side of Christ. This indicates the preciousness of this blood that renders it an object of veneration on the part of heavenly creatures as well.

The *immolated lamb*, an image that refers to the vision of the book of Revelation (5:4 ff.), passes from cemetery art in the 4th century to grand mosaic compositions in the basilicas. Generally, the lamb is placed on a small earthen mound looking over a plain. It has a wound in its side, from which drips blood, while the other sheep come to slake their thirst at the streams that flow to their feet and which originate in the wounded side. The symbolism is expressed by the words of the liturgy: “*Agnus redemit oves* – the Lamb has redeemed the sheep (Sequence for the Mass of Easter). In other compositions, the immolated lamb has before it a chalice which collects its blood, an allusion to the Eucharistic sacrifice. In a miniature of the Pontifical of Paris, which dates from the 13th century, one sees a lamb that has been wounded by a lance from the synagogue, blindfolded (because of its unbelief), and the blow is so violent that it is broken. On the other side, the Church receives a chalice of the Precious Blood.

Other images of the blood of Christ are the fountain of life, the mystical bath, the mystical winepress, the mystical balance, the tree of life.

The *fountain of life* is based on the symbolism of water united to the blood that flowed from the wounded side of Christ. Carolingian art portrays this as a fountain in the midst of a flowering garden, with or without the lamb.

The *mystical bath* is represented by a large basin in which blood falls from the Crucifix placed above it. Men and women run to the basin to be immersed in that cleansing and healing bath. Here we have an echo of the praises of the Precious Blood sung by the monks of Fécamp: “*Sanguis, animarum lavacrum* – blood, cleansing bath

of souls, wash us.” “*Sanguis, piscina languentium, salva nos* – blood, pool of the sick, save us.” “*Sanguis, fons puritatis, irriga nos* – blood, source of purity, water us.”

The *mystical winepress* shows the Man of Sorrows who pours blood under the cross adapted to a press, or Christ under a winepress while he himself treads the bunches of grapes. In this case the juice, symbol of his blood, with reference to the Eucharistic mystery, is collected in a basin and he fills it until it overflows, to indicate the superabundance of redemption and of the graces coming from the sacrifice of the Mass.

The *mystical scale* is held in the hand of the Archangel Michael. On one platter is a soul about to be judged, and on the other, a chalice or a lamb. The latter outweighs the weight of the soul because it bears the weight of the blood, superabundant price of our redemption.

The *tree of life* is a symbolic refiguring of the cross on which Christ hangs, imagined as a living tree, with branches, leaves, flowers, and fruit, in line with the words of the liturgy: “*Crux fidelis inter omnes arbor una nobilis* – Faithful cross, you are the single noble tree!” Among the various types of plants there is a preference for the *vine*, because Jesus explicitly compares himself to a vine (cf. Jn 15:1-5) and for the relationship to the Eucharistic blood, already revealed by the Fathers. The *oak* is also used as a symbol of the power coming from the sacrifice of Christ.

The cult of relics

A very effective impetus to the cult of the Precious Blood came from the veneration of *relics of the Holy Cross*, of the *instruments of the passion*, and of the *Precious Blood* itself.

St. Thomas interprets the mind of the whole Church, saying that veneration is due the Holy Cross, “because of its contact with the members of Christ and because it was bathed in his blood – *ex hoc quod crux eius sanguine sit perfusa.*” The same could be said of the other objects which were used in the martyrdom of the Lord. Such veneration had begun already many centuries before, but it was in the Middle Ages that it reached its widest spread.

Devotional movements around the *holy places*, in particular Calvary and the Holy Sepulcher, are attested from the end of the 2nd century. After the Peace of Constantine. St. Helena erected the basilica of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, in which was kept the *sacred wood of the cross*, which she had recovered around the year 325. This event is connected to the feasts of the “Exaltation” and of the “Finding of the Holy Cross.” One part of the precious relic was carried by the empress to Rome and was placed in the basilica of Holy Cross in Jerusalem, which was built by her son Constantine. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Ambrose, and many documents of the 4th century speak of the true Cross as an object of veneration.

Together with the Cross, in Jerusalem and elsewhere the instruments of the passion were venerated. St. Jerome, writing to Eustochius from Jerusalem, speaks of the *column of the scourging*, “bathed in the blood of the Lord,” which was showed to pilgrims for veneration. St. Gregory of Tours speaks of *all the instruments of the passion* – the cross, the nails, the lance, the crown of thorns, the column, the tunic – as objects “to be adored,” because they had come in contact with the Precious Blood of Jesus.

From the two principal sanctuaries in Jerusalem and in Rome, these relics were spread in small fragments in the various parts of the world, especially during the Crusades. All the cities competed to be assured of having the greatest number possible

of these relics and considered them as the most precious objects, surrounding them with the most loving care and devotion.

Often connected with these relics were the *relics of the Precious Blood*, traces of which were evident on the objects of the passion, especially on the crown. The Holy Thorn of Andria (a city in the Puglia region of Italy) was famous. Elsewhere such relics could be bits of earth impregnated with blood, said to have been collected by the disciples of Jesus on Calvary. It could also be blood contained in solid form in a vial, or a piece of cloth soaked in blood. The most famous relics were those kept in Mantua, Venice, Sarzana, Bruges, and Fécamp.

Whatever the “authenticity” of such relics might be from a historical-critical perspective, they certainly were extremely helpful in spreading and keeping alive the devotion to the blood of Christ. They offered an occasion for erecting grandiose churches and famous monasteries, for instituting popular and liturgical festivals, and various manifestations of piety.

Miraculous events also called attention to this cult. It was reported that some images of Jesus Crucified would bleed when they were struck by an impious hand. St. Thomas speaks of these also, as we will see. The Crucifix of Beirut was famous in this regard, and from the miraculous blood was distributed to many churches. At the time very certain Eucharistic miracles occurred. In these, blood dripped abundantly from a consecrated host. Among the most famous of these miracles was that of Ferrara in 1171 and Bolsena in 1264.

Ecclesiastical and spiritual writers

Medieval authors had a fondness for the topic of the blood of Christ and would treat it in their works, taking up the great themes of the tradition. They expanded these with rich language and the effective use of emotion, especially developing the mystical dimension. An example of such literature is the tract *Vitis mystica* (the mystical vine), a genuine jewel of doctrine and devotion, once attributed to St. Bernard but now attributed to St. Bonaventure. Nevertheless, not even in this epoch do we find a literature that deals specifically with the Precious Blood. The great scholastics treated this often but only incidentally, speaking of the incarnation, the passion, and the Eucharist, all doctrines intimately connected with the divine blood. St. Albert the Great, however, stands out among all of them, because he showed special attention and tender devotion in his works on this topic. Together with St. John Chrysostom and St. Augustine, the Universal Doctor is to be numbered among the greatest theologians of the Precious Blood.

The writings and the lives of the saints of the Middle Ages are genuine mines of beautiful and profound thoughts on this devotion. Of special note are St. Mathilda, St. Gertrude the Great, Blessed Angela of Foligno, and Blessed Henry Suso. St. Catherine of Siena merits a special place; her letters are soaked, so to speak, in the blood of Christ, and from her intimately lived devotion to the Precious Blood she gained the authority to effectively explain her grand social mission before popes, cardinals, and others with power. She is rightly considered to be the most illustrious exponent of this cult in the Middle Ages, and for this reason Fr. Faber honors her with the beautiful title of “prophetess of the Precious Blood.”

THE CULT OF THE PRECIOUS BLOOD FROM THE RENAISSANCE TO THE 18TH CENTURY

The awakening of culture, in particular of *belles-lettres*, the progress of the sciences, and new discoveries created a movement that placed the human being in the central place of history, and thus it is generally called *humanism*, a break with the theocentric mentality of the Middle Ages. While many Christian humanists could reconcile the human and the divine, the greater number exaggerated the human, paying homage to pagan antiquity which lived again in their hearts. There was a tendency to divorce religion from practical living, which necessarily led to superficiality and religious indifference and, in the following centuries, to philosophism and rationalism.

In this historical period, which runs from the end of the Middle Ages to the French Revolution, the devotion experienced highs and lows, following a process of “exteriorization,” according to the mood of the times, and losing its hold on the great mass of the populace. Here are the most relevant stages.

Two theological controversies

In the 15th century there were two famous theological controversies surrounding the blood of Christ which spawned an abundant literature.

The first concerned the possibility of existence of *relics of the Precious Blood*. St. Thomas denied that these could exist, because “all the blood that poured from the body of Christ belonged to his human nature in his essential reality and rose with the body of Christ.” He affirmed that “the blood, which in certain churches is preserved among the relics, did not flow from the side of Christ, but is said to have flowed from some image of Christ that had been wounded.” The question, moreover, was presented to the faculty of the University of Paris in 1448, and this body decided that “it is not repugnant to the piety of the faithful to believe that a little of Christ’s blood, shed during the passion,

should remain on earth.” The cult of such relics was approved a year later by Pope Nicholas V, even if for another reason, namely, that it was blood that poured out miraculously from some images.

The judgment of the University of Paris was, however, adopted in 1461 by Pope Pius II, who declared solemnly “that it was not repugnant to the truth of faith to admit that Christ has left some portion of his blood on earth as a remembrance and for the devoted cult of his most sacred passion.” Suárez noted that some drops of blood do not take away the integrity and truth of Christ’s human nature. This doctrine was later reaffirmed by the learned Benedict XIV: “

In some places, particularly in the city of Mantua, some drops of blood that came from the side of Christ are preserved... Based on the authority of the best theologians, we affirm that it is possible that some drops of the Precious Blood of Christ remained on the earth, and that they were not necessary for the integrity of his body, and therefore it was not necessary that these be joined to that body in the resurrection.

The second controversy was the famous dispute between the Friars Minor and the Dominicans known as the *Triduum mortis* or Triduum of the death of Christ: Whether the blood of Christ, shed during the passion and destined to be reassumed in the resurrection, was united to his divinity during the three days his body rested in the tomb. The Franciscans favored a negative judgment to this proposition, the Dominicans affirmed it.

After various events, the question was brought before Pius II and solemnly discussed on December 18, 1462. The pope and cardinals were inclined to the Dominican position, but for political reasons no judgment was rendered, and it was forbidden to discuss the question further. But as the discussions did continue, and with harsh polemics, on August 1, 1464, Pius II, with the Bull “*Ineffabilis summa*

providentia,” formally renewed the prohibition of discussing the matter, under pain of excommunication reserved to the Holy See. The definition never came. Meanwhile, the affirmative judgment, that during the three days after Christ’s death his blood remained hypostatically united to the Word, became dominant in all the theological schools, because it was more in conformity with sacred Scripture, with the thought of the Fathers, the teaching of the Church and Christian piety.

Protestantism

In the 15th century the sad division of the Church took place with the Protestant Reformation. Huge regions in which devotion to the Precious Blood were established were no longer part of a unified Catholicism. Was this devotion was destroyed and dispersed in that great storm, along with the other treasures of the faith and of piety found in the cult of the Eucharist, of the Blessed Virgin, of the saints, and of relics?.

We must see merciful Providence in the fact that, even after being cut off from Rome, the spirit of devotion to the blood of Christ remains alive in the Protestant world. It was deeply rooted in Luther himself, who used to repeat the ancient hymn of praise from the fervor of the Middle Ages: *Ave caput cruentatum* – “Hail, bleeding head,” and he created a German version of the hymn for popular use. This song, passed from generation to generation under different forms, is in use today among separated Christians and nurtures the devotion of just souls. (This is, of course, a reference to the hymn “O Bleeding Head So Wounded.”)

It is true that devotion to the Precious Blood in the Protestant world was not entirely that handed on by Catholic tradition because it often lacked one essential part: the Eucharist. Nevertheless, we must recognize that what remained of the devotion fed a

genuine fervor in the spiritual life among Protestants. The religious feeling that is found today in the Protestant regards the mystery of the Precious Blood being at the heart of Christian faith. Witnessing to this are the representations of the mystery, sacred poems, devotional hymns, and the famous “Passions,” among which that of Johann Sebastian Bach excels in expressing the religious depths of the German soul.

Anglican spirituality was less affected by doctrinal differences and is more vividly permeated with a sentiment of devotion to the Precious Blood. One can cite, for example, lyric poets like Edmund Spenser, John Donne, Frederick Tennyson. They revived the ardent expressions of love of the great Medieval mystics. It is good to remember the words of the poet Henry Vaughan (+1695) who, gazing on the blood of Christ, foretold the unity of the Church: “O Lord, “unite everyone by the blood of your Beloved Son, and that we can be fed as a faith flock in one sheepfold and that all can preserve a single faith.”

Interest of the Protestant world in the theme of the Precious Blood continues to be expressed today, especially with scientific and biblical research and with devotional and catechetical books. In Sunday sermons there is frequent reference to the blood of Christ. Religious pamphlets propagating this theme are being distributed. Forms of high spirituality are not lacking. For example, there are religious communities dedicated to this devotion, for example, the Sisters of the Precious Blood of Burnham Abbey in the United Kingdom.

Confraternities, congregations, and liturgical feasts

Returning to the Catholic world, we could say that after the upheaval of the Protestant Reformation, devotion to the Precious Blood was reaffirmed in the climate of

the Counter Reformation, at least in its external manifestations. Confraternities and other religious associations with the title of “Precious Blood” began to multiply. The occasion was nearly always suggested by some famous relic. Faber notes that at the end of the 13th century, a congregation was founded in England with the aim of keeping alive the devotion around a famous relic that had been brought to Great Britain from Germany during the reign of Henry III (+1272). He also cites an ancient confraternity of the Precious Blood in Ravenna. Another of these existed in Ferrara, honoring the blood that flowed miraculously from a host in 1171, a confraternity that was aggregated to the famous Confraternity of the Gonfalone in Rome in 1503. Under the pontificate of Gregory XIII another arose in Rome, which was confirmed by Pope Sixtus V; its members were priests who obliged themselves to preach holy missions. This was also merged into the Gonfalone. In Spain, confraternities of the Precious Blood existed in many places, already before 1600. Faber names the confraternity in Valencia specifically.

Vincenzo Gonzago IV, duke of Mantua, founded a military order in 1608 called “Redemptorists of the Precious Blood” to honor and care for the famous relic preserved in the church of Sant’Andrea. A congregation of “Bernardines of the Precious Blood” was founded in France by Mother De Ballon, a relative of Francis De Sales, and had its greatest development in Paris in 1654. Other associations sprang up here and there in the course of these centuries but did were not long lasting.

From the 16th century on, the specific cult in honor of the Precious Blood began to enter into the official liturgy of the Church with the institution of feasts that were, however, celebrated on different dates. One of the first concessions on the part of the Holy See was the office “*De sanguine Christi*” given to the diocese of Valencia in Spain.

Around this time and even earlier, liturgical feasts were celebrated in those places where relics were preserved, like Venice, where the office was celebrated on the third Sunday of March, with a rank of double of the first class. There were also offices in Ferrara, Bruges, and in Rome, in the church of San Nicola in Carcere, a feast was celebrated on the first Sunday of July.

Following these the concessions multiplied. In 1747 the diocese of Sarzana obtained a Mass and office for the day after the feast of the Holy Trinity. In 1794 the Passionists, various dioceses, and all of Portugal on the fourth Sunday of Lent. In 1778, the diocese of Breslau on the third Friday of March, and so various other diocese or congregations in the course of the month of March or of Lent.

Decline of the devotion: Jansenism

It should be noted that in the centuries considered to be part of the Renaissance until the apostolate of St. Gaspar Del Bufalo, people did not experience a deep devotion to the Precious Blood as it was during antiquity and in the Middle Ages, despite some excellent initiatives. We should recognize that the spirit of this devotion underwent a progressive decline.

It is true that there were many chosen spirits who lived the devotion fully, drawing from it treasures for their own sanctification. In addition, in that epoch the writings and the lives of the saints offer very abundant testimonies, just as in previous centuries. It will be enough to name St. Mary Magdalen de'Pazzi, St. Francis of Jerome, Blessed John of Avila, St. Camillus De Lellis, and St. Leonard of Porto Maurizio. The devotion was cultivated especially by the Dominicans and the Franciscans.

In this regard, there were generous souls who sought to have the devotion permeate the religious awareness of the masses in more than a superficial way. Their attempts were limited in scope and were not successful. Local feasts were celebrated where there were religious institutes, relics continued to be honored, and people would wear the distinctive “habits” of the confraternities, but in general the people were far from an awareness of the substance of the devotion. A false mentality emerged, suggesting that the devotion was too difficult for the common people and was the province of the mystical patrimony. This is confirmed in the way in which it was lived by some privileged souls and in certain ardent expressions of the saints.

The *spirit of Jansenism*, in the 17th and 18th centuries, was widespread among the clergy and contributed to the decline of the devotion to the Precious Blood. Religion became a force that fostered fear in the faithful. A holy terror deformed piety and devotion; the faithful were kept from the sacraments on the pretext of their unworthiness. In this harsh climate there was no room for an affective involvement of the heart with the mystery of the blood in which one participated by means of the Eucharist. Only a memory remained of the genuine devotion, at least on the popular level.

When St. Gaspar Del Bufalo began to preach the devotion to the Precious Blood at the beginning of the 19th century and gave this title to his Missionaries, he found no little opposition in Rome, and many of the clergy called it scandalous, “because naming the adorable blood of the Savior, which should have been held with the same restraint and reverence as that of YHWH in the Old Testament, was now being spoken of without respect in the mouths of everyone.” St. Gaspar was forced to defend the title of the Institute before Pope Leo XII. Moreover, St. Peter Julian Eymard, who was spreading

the devotion a few years later in France, said openly in one of his letters that at that time, “such a beautiful and salutary devotion...was *unknown and dormant*.”

The Lord, however, awakened the devotion and made it a powerful means for the spiritual rebirth of the Christian faithful.

THE CULT OF THE PRECIOUS BLOOD IN THE MODERN AGE

It was the Roman priest Gaspar Del Bufalo (1786-1837) who was given the divine mission of spreading the devotion and he distinguished himself in doing so. On June 12, 1954, Pope Pius XII presented him to the world as the most illustrious apostle of the divine blood in the modern age:

But in this age, among those who, with vigilant attention and passionate zeal, have eloquently preached the benefits of the Blood that was shed, with its devotion and worship restored, the one who shines brightly among all, is Gaspar del Bufalo, whom today we have adorned with the crown of Saints.

The frivolous and superficial society of the 1700s was brutally squashed by the French Revolution which created a shambles in attempting to create a new order. Along with the ancient social structures every means was taken to destroy the Church. Philosophism, atheistic laicism, and the sects conspired against it. Napoleon I persecuted the Church with his hegemonic pretensions. In the space of a few brief years, two popes, Pius VI and Pius VII, were taken into exile and prison. But the spouse of Christ emerged victorious from this harsh trial and, after the wars and carnage of those crucial years, quickly moved to restore Christian life and to move the new times to the good.

The apostolate of St. Gaspar Del Bufalo

The apostolic activity of St. Gaspar Del Bufalo is a shining light against this historical background. Commissioned by Pius VII to evangelize the Papal States through missions and retreats, with divine inspiration he chose devotion to the Precious Blood as a means for this awakening of piety and of moral reform. Placing himself within the tradition of preaching of the apostolic era, he dedicated himself to spreading the devotion with unflagging zeal throughout his entire life, and he harvested abundant good fruit.

His principal merit was preaching the devotion to the masses as the fundamental devotion of the whole Christian people and not just of a few privileged. To this end, he did not engage in elevated speculation but could present the devotion in a simple format, popular and accessible to all. Above all, he knew how to educate them to put it into practice.

He created highly effective methods for the soul in touch with the mystery of the divine blood. First of these was frequent and even daily participation in the Mass, which renews the sacrifice of the blood of Jesus on the altar before the eyes of the faithful. During the Mass, he advocated praying the *Chaplet of the Precious Blood* as a way for the faithful to unite themselves to the victim of Calvary. The Chaplet had been composed by Bishop Francesco Albertini of Terracina, who had been Gaspar's spiritual director. Other methods he advocated were: the *month of the Precious Blood*, which he devised and introduced into the practice of the Church. He asked the bishop of Macerata, St. Vincent Strambi, to compose a little book to guide the faithful in this practice. Other methods were: the *Seven Offerings of the Precious Blood*, the monthly *hour of adoration*, either public or private, and *perpetual devotion*. All of these pious practices

were enriched by the Church with many indulgences, and today they are commonly used by the people.

Institutions of St. Gaspar Del Bufalo

So that his work would not cease with the end of his own life, St. Gaspar prepared three organizations to spread in space and time this devotion that was so close to his heart.

First in order of time was the *Confraternity or Pious Union of the Precious Blood*, instituted in 1808, the fruit of collaboration with Don Francesco Albertini. In 1815 it was formally approved by Pius VII and declared to be an Archconfraternity and primary pious union. He erected this wherever he went, charging those enrolled with honoring the price of redemption with devotional practices and works of charity.

Then came the Congregation of *Missionaries of the Precious Blood*, founded in 1815 and approved by Gregory XVI on December 17, 1841. Last was the institute of the *Sisters Adorers of the Precious Blood* which, inspired and willed by the Saint, was founded by St. Maria De Mattias in 1834 and approved by Pius IX with a decree of January 28, 1878.

Liturgical devotion

The apostolate of St. Gaspar opened the way to a greater expansion of the *liturgical devotion* in honor of the divine blood. As we have seen, beginning in the 16th century, offices in honor of the Precious Blood were approved. What was lacking, however, was a unifying agreement in the date, texts and rank of the feast. So that the infinite price of our redemption would be solemnly honored in a stable and universal

was for the great benefit of the people of God, St. Gaspar immediately realized the need for a *feast of the Precious Blood* to be celebrated in the universal Church, thus entering into the cycle of the liturgy on a fixed date in the Church year. He advocated strongly for the institution of such a solemnity, and he suggested the date of the first Sunday of July, the date on which it had been celebrated at San Nicola in Carcere in Rome from antiquity.

The Church, however, did not judge it the right time to establish this. St. Gaspar did obtain the feast for all the houses of his Congregation for the first Sunday of July on May 27, 1822. The approval was renewed in following years at the request of many dioceses and religious families. On May 27, 1826, he obtained similar approval for celebrating the feast in all the places where the Pious Union of the Precious Blood had been instituted. He sought numerous other rescripts, thus paving the way for an extension of the feast to the universal Church.

This was finally accomplished through the initiative of the Servant of God Giovanni Merlini, the third director of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood. He went to Gaeta in 1849 to pay homage to Pope Pius IX, who was in exile since revolutionaries had established the Republic of Mazzini in Rome. When the Holy Father asked him when those disastrous days for the Church would end, Merlini replied that if he would vow to extend the feast of the Precious Blood on the first Sunday of July to the entire Catholic Church, he would immediately return to his see in Rome.

The Pope, who held the sanctity of Merlini in great esteem, replied that he did not think it appropriate to bind himself with a vow, but he immediately extended the feast with a *motu proprio* and obtained the promised grace. Before the advances of the French, who had come to the aid of Pius IX, the republicans had fled Rome on the first

of July 1849, which fell on a Sunday that year, and the authority of the pope was reestablished in the capital and in the Papal States. On August 10, Pius IX, still in Gaeta where he was waiting for the political situation to become clearer, issued the Decree *Redempti sumus*, with which he ordered that the entire Church should celebrate the feast of the Precious Blood on the first Sunday of July.

In 1914, St. Pius X set the date for the feast on July 1. On April 25, 1934, Pius XI, on the occasion of the 19th centenary of redemption, raised the feast to the rank of double of the first class, “to remind those led astray by rampant paganism in their lives and morals, the need to return to the *sources of grace*, to the wounds and *to the blood which poured forth from them* for the purification and salvation of the human race.”

The Mass and office of the Precious Blood in use [at the time of writing] were composed on the order of Benedict XIV and are the same texts as those granted to the diocese of Sarzana in 1747. A substantial commentary on the liturgical texts was written by the noted liturgist Don Gaspar Lefebvre, OSB, with the title: “The spiritual riches accumulated by the Church in the liturgy of July 1st.”

[In the reforms of the liturgy after the Second Vatican Council, the Feast of the Precious Blood was merged into that of Corpus Christ. The feast is called the “Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ.” – translator’s note]

Progressive development of devotion to the Precious Blood

As an effect of the reawakening stirred in the Christian conscience by St. Gaspar and by the consequent extension of the feast of the blood of Christ to the universal Church, born in the 19th century and gradually approved for the whole world, a genuine

movement of piety and interest around the august mystery of the divine blood ensued, a healthy return to the pure sources of Christian piety.

Witness to this growing awakening is the literature, both scientific and devotional in character, that has grown greatly in the last decades. One only needs to glance at the copious bibliography reported by Andrew Pollack, CPPS, in his book, *The Blood of Christ in Christian Greek Literature*, which occupies nine pages. Many periodicals are expressly dedicated to this topic. Devotional manuals are published every year and are getting into the hands of all. Among the authors worthy of places of honor are the famous English Oratorian Frederick William Faber, the already mentioned French liturgist Don Gaspar Lefebvre, OSB, and among Italians, Cardinal Adeodato Piazza, Igino Giordani and the Missionary Don Amilcare Rey, CPPS.

In addition to the pious union founded by St. Gaspar, there are other great confraternities and associations of the faithful. We note only the Confraternity of the Precious Blood, with its headquarters in Brooklyn, New York, which offers publications and various initiatives in all the United States of America, and that of the Oratory of London, which has been engaged in this flourishing apostolate since the time of Father Faber.

It is comforting to see the multiplication of religious institutes under the title of the Precious Blood that are directly or indirectly related to the work of St. Gaspar Del Bufalo. There are no fewer than 15 such communities today with either pontifical or diocesan right, besides those founded by Gaspar.

All this together presages broader developments and a deeper penetration of the devotion in Christian piety. Devotion to the Precious Blood is linked to the other great devotions of the universal Church, like that of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, of the

Eucharist, and of the Passion. It is at the foundation of the doctrine of the mystical body, so much emphasized in our day in order to bring the faithful back to intimate participation in the mystery of Christ. It has benefited from the liturgical movement, which tends to center attention of Christian piety on the sacrifice of the Mass.

[Since this volume was written in 1960, it does not describe the development of the spirituality of the Precious Blood since then. The reader is asked to consult the material in the bibliography that follows and in material found on the websites of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood and the Adorers of the Blood of Christ. – Translator's note]

APPENDIX

The article has a number of footnotes, most of which are not included in this translation. These are a few of the resources in English that were cited and which might be useful to the reader.

Banet Charles - Maurice Vloberg. "The Precious Blood in Art", *Proceedings of the First Precious Blood Study Week*, Rensselaer (Indiana) 1959, 109-192.

Faber, Frederick. *The Precious Blood or The Price of Our Redemption*. 1860. Chapter 5 of this work has a history of Precious Blood devotion and associations.

Pollack Andrew J., *The Blood of Christ in Christian Greek Literature*, Doctoral dissertation, The Messenger Press, Carthagen (Ohio) 1956.

Rohling Joseph H., *The Blood of Christ in Christian Latin Literature*, Doctoral dissertation., The Catholic University of America, Washington (D.C.) 1932.

Siebeneck Robert T., "The Precious Blood and Saint John," *Proceedings of the First Precious Blood Study Week*, Rensselaer (Indiana) 1959, 65-92.

Siegman Edward F., "Blood in the Old Testament," *Proceedings of the First Precious Blood Study Week*, Rensselaer (Indiana) 1959, 33-64.

Sullivan Francis, "The Precious Blood and the Paschal Mystery," in *Proceedings of the First Precious Blood Study Week*, Rensselaer (Indiana) 1959, 172-183.