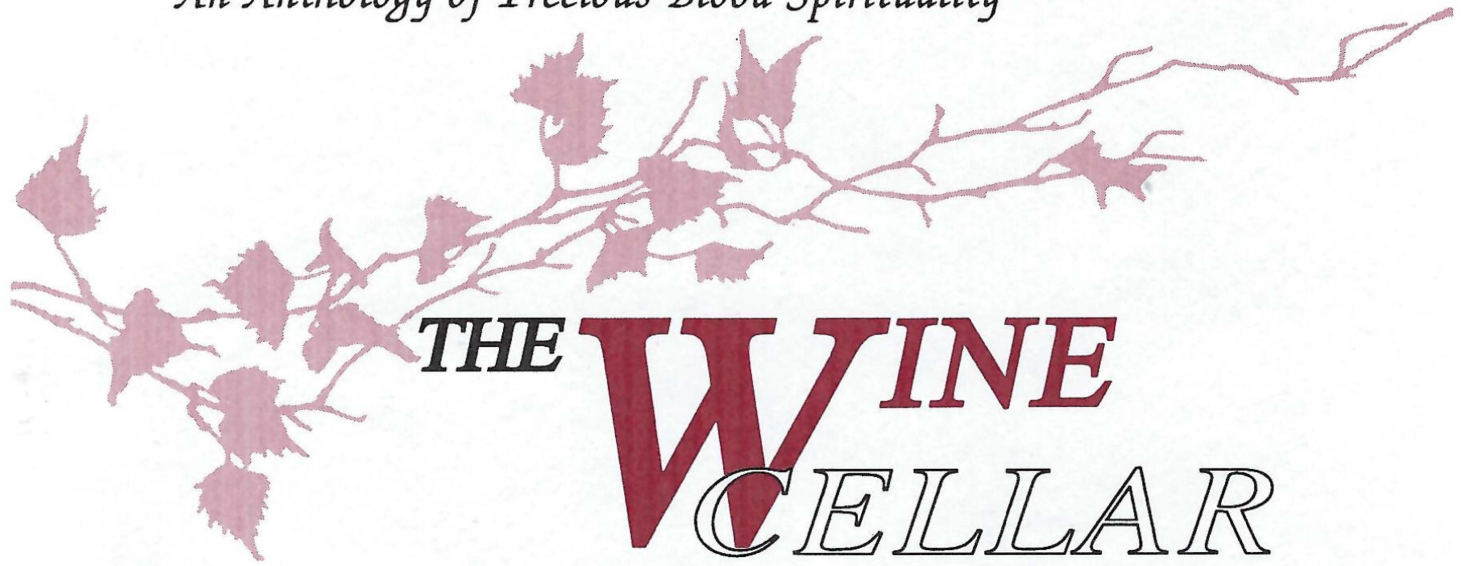


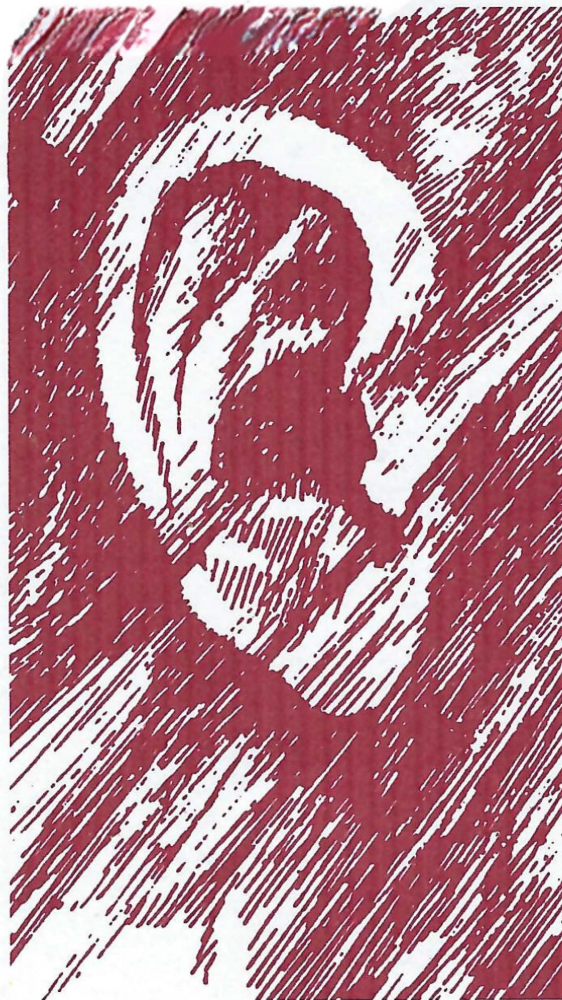
*An Anthology of Precious Blood Spirituality*



**THE** **WINE**  
**CELLAR**

June 1998, Number.16

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**Word**

*The heart of Jesus  
is the wine cellar  
of the Blood of Christ.*

**Saint Gaspar del Bufalo**

**THE  
WINE  
CELLAR**

*An Anthology of Precious Blood Spirituality*

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# FROM THE WINE CELLAR

By Alan Hartway, CPPS

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*When they are to deliver a sermon to an assembly, let them construct it with care, having first implored the help of God. . . . Let them adapt themselves by facility in speech to the feelings and the understanding of the audience, so that they may not weaken in any way the worth of the divine Word. **The Rule of 1841, Article 24***

*Living together in mission houses they (the professed members) were a source of continual renewal for the priests and the people, mainly by preaching missions and retreats. **Normative Texts C1***

*The society dedicates itself to the service of the Church through the apostolic and missionary activity of the ministry of the word. **Normative Texts C3***

**R**ecently I was engaging in dialogue with a group of high school students at a large suburban parish where I regularly substitute. They had proposed written questions in advance which I would then attempt to answer in a discussion format with them. Among the forty or so questions mostly covering the top ten most frequently asked Catholic questions about purgatory and limbo, one particularly earnest question stood out. “When someone said to Jesus, ‘Say but the word, and I shall be healed,’ what is the word that Jesus spoke?”

My first thought was just this, “Wouldn’t it be great if there were that one magic word we could speak and all would be healed?” I told the teenager that, while Jesus did speak the word, “Be healed!”, it isn’t that simple. More often the word we find ourselves saying is the first creative word of God, “Let there be . . .,” as we learn to live with suffering in our lives and listen to the voice of violence in our world. I want to extend these thoughts in my article in this issue in a reflection on the Word.

The inspiration for the theme of this issue comes from the

Rule and the **Normative Texts**. As we renew ourselves in the spirit of Maria de Mattias and Gaspar del Bufalo, we realize that our apostolate and ministry of the Word have many implications for us in our world today. More than ever we live in a world created by the word and filled with words; our time is being called the Information Age.

In this issue focusing on the Word, Robert Schreiter, CPPS opens with a reflection on the words and narratives of reconciliation. Our most powerful words are arguably: "I love you," "I promise," and "I forgive you." God's Word spoken to us is the cry of the blood from the cross calling us to peace.

In a meditative short story, Toni Longo, ASC engages our imagination to rediscover the grace and power of the word within our hearts which we preach with our lives. A precious blood poet, Benita Volk, CPPS shares her vision of poetry and writing. She invites us to find our own authentic voice. Words have the power to transform the ordinary which leads to redemption. Out of her prison ministry experience, Pauline Grady shares with us concerns in biblical catechesis when literalism and interpretation clash. Teaching scripture for her has become grounded in respect and humility.

Our last article, *Preparing the Word* by Richard Bayuk, CPPS offers us some methods for individual and group homily preparation. Homilies are best rooted in imagination and experience and connected with the tradition and scripture. We introduce a new poet, Terry Maher, CPPS and a familiar poet, Madeliene Kisner, ASC. Our center graphic is by Al Naseman, CPPS Cincinnati Province, poet, artist, and missionary. We hope you'll enjoy and be challenged with this issue.

Thank you for your participation in the last three themes on **Compassion, Prayer, and Priestly People**. You will find enclosed a subscription card for the next three issues on the themes of **Spirit, Blood, and Creation**. We hope you're able to join us. Also now available is a new edition of *United in Prayer*, a precious blood prayerbook of new and traditional prayers for the whole precious blood family of communities. These may be ordered individually or in bulk from **THE NEW WINE PRESS**, Precious Blood Center, PO Box 339, Liberty, MO 64069-0339 or faxing 816-781-3639.



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**BENITA VOLK**, CPPS has already graced the pages of *THE WINE CELLAR* with her poetry. She writes from the CPPS Dayton community where she transforms daily experience into the extraordinary with luminous words.

# Words of Reconciliation and Forgiveness

By Robert J. Schreiter, CPPS

## The Power of Words

**O**ne of the things that distinguishes us humans from the rest of the animal kingdom is our ability to speak. To be sure, chimpanzees and other members of the monkey family can articulate a few words, but none of them can create the worlds we do with our words.

If we think but for a moment about how important words are in our lives, we see what a significant role they play in our relations with one another and in the shaping of our understanding of who we are. When young children speak their first word, it is a moment of celebration for us. By speaking, they have moved beyond being infants into becoming little human beings, with whom we can relate in a new way.

Words continue to shape the special moments of our lives. The first time someone says to us “I love you” when we are teenagers marks a significant transition out of childhood. After that, the “I do” we pronounce on our wedding day changes our lives again. Speaking with absent relatives and friends over the telephone affirms ties with people whom we cannot see. When we come face to face, we celebrate our coming together with a torrent of words—”catching up,” we call it. The last words people speak to us as they are dying—especially that emotionally charged “good bye”—stay with us for the rest of our own lives. The “I’m so sorry” that we often say at funerals is a stammering attempt to express the sorrow that burdens our hearts.

*Words bind us together; such is their power.*

Words bind us together; such is their power. But words also do harm and alienate as well. Words of betrayal, lies, and words that speak a harsh judgement upon us wound us as nearly nothing else can. Worse even than that is the refusal to speak, especially in those situations where family members and once close friends wound and punish one another by holding back the gift of themselves, by maintaining an icy silence where once there was the warmth of words.

There is also the painful absence of words: When someone we love has been stricken by a stroke and can no longer speak; when Alzheimers stills the voice of a loved one. We experience a loss for words when we journey to a foreign country and can neither understand nor be understood.

All in all, our capacity to speak makes us human. It is not just the single words which we speak that so define

*It is the weaving together of those words into sentences that try to express what we feel, and especially into the stories by which we keep our memory and try to give shape to our lives that allow words to reveal their power.*



us, however. It is the weaving together of those words into sentences that try to express what we feel, and especially into the stories by which we keep our memory and try to give shape to our lives that allow words to reveal their power. So much of our identity that which makes us who we are is embedded not in descriptions we may make of ourselves, as it is in the stories we tell about ourselves and in turn the stories that others tell about us. It is worth stopping to think from time to time about the power of words: how they make us who we are, how they wound us, and how they heal us.

## Words and the Word

**O**ur religious and spiritual traditions tell us of the power of words. The beginning of the book of Genesis has God creating the world through a simple act of speaking: "Then God said, 'Let there be light!' and there was light." (Genesis 1, 3) God's own being so surpasses our capacity to speak that the Divine Reality can only be known as "I AM." (Exodus 3, 14) And again and again we hear in the Scriptures how the "Word of the Lord" comes to the prophets, who speak words of judgement, conversion, and peace upon the people of Israel.

John's Gospel identifies Jesus as the Word who was at the beginning with God, and through whom God created the world. (John 1, 1-3) In Jesus we find all that God wishes to say to us about ourselves, our world, and God's own very Self. Not only has all been created in Christ, but it is in Christ that all things will be brought together again. (Ephesians 1, 10) It is our life in Christ that most roots us in God's creating and healing Word. We are caught up in the great drama of creation that stretches from that first word that called forth light from nothing, to that moment when all things will come together in Christ once again.

## The Word of Reconciliation

**I**t is within this understanding of how words shaped our lives, and how we in turn are shaped by God's own Word that I wish to reflect on one set of words: those that

surround reconciliation. My point of departure here is 2 Corinthians 5, 17-20:

*So whoever is in Christ is a new creation; the old things have passed away; behold, new things come. And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*

Reconciliation is something we often seek in our lives but find difficult to attain. If we have been the victims of wrongdoing, we struggle to comprehend our hurt and anger, and wonder if we can ever forgive. If we are the wrongdoers, we anguish over how we can ever undo the harm we have afflicted on another.

**Reconciliation  
is tied up  
with words.**

Perhaps more than anything else that we struggle to overcome or achieve in our lives, reconciliation is tied up with words. For the person who has suffered wrongdoing, coming to terms with that hurt or trauma involves telling the story of what happened, over and over again. However imperfect our words are, they remain the best vehicle to get hold of what has happened to us.

As we retell the story of our hurt and pain, there is the chance that, over time, the story will begin to change as we gain new perspective on what has happened to us. When that moment arrives, we choose new words to describe our experience. It is that gaining of a new perspective that signals God's reconciling work in our lives. Suddenly we get a shift of perspective; we see ourselves and those who have done wrong to us in a new way. Or in the case of loss, we are able to talk about a deceased, loved one from a different perspective. When that happens, we experience coming to a new place. We experience God's healing

the brokenness in our lives.

I think this is what Paul is referring to when he says that we are a new creation: “the old things have passed away; behold new things have come.” We find ourselves in a new place, and can see our pain and suffering from a new perspective. We have the feeling that this is something that we have not achieved of ourselves, but is something that has been given to us. It is truly a gift. When the coming to that new creation is a profound and deep move in our lives, we can only say that such a gift has come to us from God.

Not only does reconciliation make of us a new creation, bringing us to a new place, but it requires words on our part to say what has happened. When you meet people who have come to terms with a profound loss in their lives, they have to tell you the story of what happened to them: the experience of the loss, the struggle to come to terms with it, and how the change came about in their lives.

An example is a story I heard from a woman some years ago. She and her husband had struggled for years to have a child, and were finally blessed with a wonderful boy. He grew up to be an outgoing and engaging young man, always concerned with the needs of others. During the summer vacation after his first year in college, he was killed in a construction accident at the site where he was working. His parents were utterly disconsolate, and withdrew from their family and friends.

Then, one day about a year after their son's death, the woman realized that their son would never have wanted them to withdraw from life as they had done. He would have wanted them to do the opposite, something he himself had always done: namely, reach out and care for others.

This was the turning point, both for the woman and her

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husband. Since that time, they have thrown themselves into volunteer work for their parish and for a retreat center nearby. Indeed, it was in those circumstances that I met them.

As this woman told me her story, she noted that the coming to this insight was something she could not have done alone. In fact, she had struggled long and hard to come to terms with her son's death without any success. The burden could not be lifted from her. Now that this moment of grace has come to her, she finds herself compelled to tell the story to all the people she meets.

This woman experienced a reconciliation that comes from God. She is a new creation, and in telling her story, has been entrusted with the message of reconciliation. That message is that God, who created the world with a word, has in the Word Made Flesh given us hope and healing and the possibility of becoming a new creation. She had become an ambassador of Christ's message of reconciliation.

## **Ministry of Reconciliation as Ministry of the Word**

**T**he philosopher Hannah Arendt once said that the two most important things that we can say are "I forgive" and "I promise." Words of forgiveness and promise are commitments to build a different kind of future. They announce that the present cannot be governed totally by the past, and that if the future is to be better than the present, then we must be willing to walk a different road and strike out in new directions.

We are only able to forgive when that sense of our own

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reconciliation.*

*The two most important  
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humanity has been restored in God's reconciling activity. Otherwise, we remain beholden to the past. We can only promise when we have confidence in ourselves to bring about something different. Both forgiveness (I will not let the past hold me hostage.) and promise (I want a different future for us.) depend heavily on the words we speak and the stories we tell.

In the passage from 2 Corinthians, Paul speaks with an excitement about being a new creation, and with an urgency that this message be shared with others. To be able to speak the word of forgiveness and the word of promise, we must allow God to make of us a new creation. God does this by speaking to us that word of reconciliation that restores our humanity and allows us to think of new possibilities. Out of that word comes a message for ourselves and for others.

*To be able to speak the word of forgiveness and the word of promise we must allow God to make of us a new creation.*

The word of reconciliation and forgiveness is tied up in Paul's mind with the blood Christ shed on the cross. It is that blood that makes the peace which is reconciliation (Colossians 1, 20). It is that blood, that cries out louder than the blood of Abel, that is able to bring the world back together.

The *Constitution of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood* states simply that our ministry is "the ministry of the Word." (C4) To some, that may seem puzzling. Should not our ministry be sharing our precious blood spirituality? Or should it not emphasize our missionary activity? Actually, our spirituality and our missionary activity are brought together in that Word. It is the Word through whom God made the universe, the Word whom God sent to redeem us. It is in the eloquence of that blood shed for us that God's great love is spoken to us.

We experience that great love especially in words of reconciliation and forgiveness. It is hard to think of any other



kinds of experience where we can feel God so close to us, as when we experience reconciliation from loss or from what we have suffered. There is no greater experience of God's drawing near than being forgiven or being able to forgive someone else. "You who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." (Ephesians 2, 13) It is our capacity to speak words of healing and forgiveness that God gives us in the ministry of the Word. Nowhere else are we so clearly ambassadors for Christ's sake.



## For Reflection

Can you remember times in your life when what someone said touched you or hurt you in a special way? What were those words?

Have you had an experience of loss or hurt in your life that came to be resolved? Tell the story and describe the experience. How do you talk of the story now, as compared to before that turning point came.

Have you had an experience of reconciliation that allowed you to forgive? How has that changed your life? Do you do things differently now?

Can you recall instances when words you said made a difference in someone's life?



# Once upon a time there was a Word . . .

By Toni Longo, ASC

**O**nce upon a time in a not-so-far-away place lived a young girl. She was quite ordinary and not considered “special” in any way by the people around her. She did the normal young girl things, sharing secrets with her friends and daydreaming about how things “could be.”

She lived in a quite ordinary house with her mother, father, one brother and two sisters. The family did many things together and really loved one another, but sometimes the young girl just wanted to be alone. (You know how it is with young girls!) Now it happened that the family’s quite ordinary house was near a meadow with flowers of every kind and trees which reached up to the skies and down into the ground with roots so big that she could sit on them. The young girl would go to this meadow each day and fly her kite. She was good at that and was able to keep her heart-shaped kite afloat for a long time, watching it dance above in the gentle breeze. Then she would sit on the roots of the largest tree and dream.

One day many years later as a young woman, she sat again in her favorite place. She had come home to visit after a long time away. A child came up and sat down beside her. She had a most radiant face and wore a dress of the deepest crimson the young woman had ever seen with crimson dancing slippers. Around her neck hung a small silver heart. Her large brown eyes looked both happy and sad at the same time. They held love and longing. They looked so deeply into the young woman

that she felt as if nothing were hidden, none of her longing or her pain, none of her joy and contentment. It was scary, yet the young woman was not afraid. She saw in the eyes of the child such acceptance and peace that she was strangely comfortable in her presence.

Neither spoke. They just sat gazing at each other and enjoying the beauty of their surroundings. Then, after some time, the child spoke. "Do you know who I am?" "Of course not," replied the young woman. "I've never seen you before." "Yes, yes, you know me. Remember," replied the child. "Remember . . ." The young woman tried and tried to remember where she had seen the child before. At school? In the playground at the other side of town when she was little? In the grocery store? At the movies? No, none of these places. How do I know this child? "I don't think I have ever seen you before, really. Where have you come from? Who are you?"

"I am you!" replied the child. "Remember, one day years ago you sat in this very spot and wished that you might look just like me? You were wishing to be different, more special, not ordinary anymore. Remember?"

"Why are you here now? I wasn't thinking about you or wanting to be different today. That was years ago." "I am here because you are ready to see me and listen to what I've been wanting to say to you for so long." "What could you possibly have to say to me? You aren't real; you are just something I imagined." "No, I'm very real," the child said. "Listen carefully. I am you. You are I. You might think that we are so different because you have gone to school and learned so much. You are quite sophisticated now and don't have much time for imagination and play. You think a lot about all kinds of theories and how to get along in the world and how to make it up the ladder to success, not caring about how you get there."

"Hey! Wait a minute! Who are you to come to this most peaceful spot and make it into a place of confrontation and accusation! I came here to find some peace again, and you are just getting me agitated! Go away!"

"No, I won't. I can't. You are correct. I am the reason you are agitated. But you were agitated even before you came to this place. You are not content. You are not at peace. You haven't been for a long time, and you came here seeking understanding. I am your answer! So, please calm down and listen. Don't try to



shoo me away. I love you more than you love yourself, and I won't let you ruin your life. Listen!"

The young woman was drawn to the child who spoke with such wisdom, and even though at some level she feared the message, she found herself really wanting to hear it fully. "Go on. Please tell me all that you came to say. I do want to hear."

The child spoke: "I am you, you at your best, that holds all the promise and gift you were born to share. Do you know why you feel so comfortable in this place? It is because here you see the beauty that is within you. The rootedness and flight in your soul are mirrored here in this tree and your kite flying high. You are rooted both in heaven and in earth. You are made for earth and you are made for heaven.

"The many varieties of flowers and trees that you enjoy here are metaphors for the variety and creativity within you waiting to be revealed. There are no limits to your possibilities except your own fears and denials. True, your abilities and gifts differ from those of others. That doesn't make them less than or more than. It simply makes them different. Yours alone to give.

"The crimson dress you gave me is a symbol of the spirituality that covers you, that embraces all you are and do. It is the "spirit" in you, the way in which you live. It informs your very being and enlivens your life with its grace and beauty. It "in-spirits" the way you walk in the world, full of passion and compassion, reconciling all beings in love. It is simple in line and form, just as you, deep down at your core are simple in actions and thoughts. You gave me dancing slippers and a song in my heart and voice. They, too, are yours. Only you can give delight to others and to God as you gracefully glide on blistered feet. Only you can sing the words of your song. If you do not sing this song, the people around you, the world, the universe will be denied its beauty.

*The word you deeply want  
to live is within you.*

"And the voice you gave me in your dreams is strong and confident, truthful and clear. It is a voice ready to speak the truth, no matter what the risk to self. It is gentle when necessary and forceful and challenging, too. It comes from a place deep within that is beyond compromise and deceit. Indeed, the voice

you gave me is full of grace.

“The word you deeply want to live is within you. The word you deeply want to proclaim with your life is within you. It strengthens you, enlightens you, and guides you. It is the Word of God. Don’t be frightened. Believe me, it is true. The words you are called to speak are God’s words of love and compassion.

“How can this be?” asked the young woman. “Look at me. I can’t live like this. My life has been so different. I have tried to excel in the world because I didn’t have confidence in myself. I thought that if I did great things I would be great. If I walked in “special” circles, I would be special, sort of by osmosis. Have I lived a lie? Is my life worth nothing?”

“No, that’s why I’ve come here today, and really, that’s why you’ve come, too,” replied the child. “It hasn’t worked because you were looking in the wrong places. You have sought and listened to outside voices. You have danced to music different from that which makes your soul sing. You have worn another

*You are simply the  
instrument of God  
to proclaim God’s  
message.*

garment; not the beautiful “Precious Blood” colored garment of Jesus, the one whose life you share. You have spoken words that do not come from the center of your being, where truth is found in abundance. Now is the time to reclaim that which has been yours from the beginning.”

“Learn to let go. Allow the Word of God to live in you and speak through you freely. Then you will experience the freedom that comes with speaking freely without fear or concern about your “success” or what people will think of you, whether they will like your message or not. Why? Because you have no reputation to build, no one’s expectations to meet but God’s. The words are not yours. You are simply the instrument of God to proclaim God’s message. The results are God’s.”

The young woman questioned the child: “How do I know that what you say is true? How can I be sure that I have not been daydreaming again, because I want a change in my life? How will I know if all that I do and say is because of and through the power of this One who lives within me?” “Because the light of love will shine in your eyes,” the child replied. “It will embrace others, and it will free others as they begin to dance and sing

child continued. "There will be some who will think that you have "gone over the edge." They will not understand your creative heart. You will be tempted to silence the voice within, and not sing or speak its melody. You will be tempted to hold your dancing feet still, to plod along carefully rather than skip with abandon. Resist these temptations, for they will be death to your soul and deny life to others."

*The Word is near to me.  
It is on my lips and in  
my heart.*

Just then, the child took the silver heart from around her neck and placed it around the young woman's. "The heart you wear around your neck will help you to remember. What I tell you today is 'not beyond your strength or beyond your reach.' It is not in heaven, so that you need to wonder, 'who will go up to heaven for me and bring it down,' so that I may hear it and keep it? No, the Word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for your observance." The Word of God is the Son of God who came to establish that 'beautiful order' of love, justice and peace in this world. "Truly, 'the word, that is the faith that we proclaim, is very near to you, it is on your lips and in your heart.

"Today, here, in this place at this time, you are alive in the very Life of Jesus who is your true radiant Center and Source of your being. Let your face not blush with shame, for you stand in the light of God, wondrous and complete, holy and righteous, just as you are."

The young woman held the silver heart close and spoke these words: "The Word is near to me. It is on my lips and in my heart. Anoint me with your grace and truth. Speak your Word in me and through me. Fill me with love and zeal for your Word and those to whom I am called to speak. Consecrate me in truth, that all will know the Love within, the Love I proclaim, the Love that is God."

And the child joyfully cried, "Yes! Amen. Alleluia!"



## For Reflection

How would you describe the “little child” within you who is yearning to be free to live the Word it has been given to speak?

What must you do to find your true voice and freely share it with others?

In what ways have you found your true voice? What, who helped you? How can and do you share that wisdom with others now?

What is the “Word” within you that God wants to speak?



# On the Possibilities of Preachers and Poets

By Alan Hartway, CPPS

*What gesticulates in us is not for one's self but the others.*  
Teilhard de Chardin

**T**he book of Leviticus has very few stories, so when we read one, it stands out. In particular there is the story in Leviticus 24, 10-23 which includes the saying, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." First of all, it is interesting that this saying is found among the liturgical legislation of the Holiness Code comprising the major portion of this book. Second, the story is all about the power and place of words in our culture just as much as theirs. A man, with an Israelite mother and Egyptian father, uses God's name as a curse in a brawl with an Israelite. Because of his misuse of the holiest of all words, the community brings him to Moses, who then compassionately takes him into his personal custody to protect him from others until God solves the dilemma with an answer. After all, the community wants to resolve the problem of the blasphemy and is prepared to do something violent to this man, an alien. God orders the lex talionis and death by stoning.

It is a very powerful story with a message that has permeated our Western culture; it is used frequently to justify our destructive behaviors toward one another of our three cultural "r's". Like reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic, they are revenge, retribution, and resistance. We've learned these words so well, many people think

that the line “Revenge is sweet,” is in the Bible. Actually it comes from John Milton, and the whole verse is, “Revenge, at first though sweet, / ‘ere long, back on itself, recoils.” The verse points to a deeper truth about the cycle of revenge and its implications for society. Milton’s clever use of the final verb “recoils” should powerfully evoke for us the serpent coiled around the tree of good and evil tempting us to choose our own ways over God’s ways.

## A Closer Reading

**A** closer reading suggests and hints that something completely unexpected is occurring here. Notice that God orders those in community who heard the word of blasphemy to lay their hand upon this man. It is at once a direct confrontation between those inside the community’s security and a man now outside the circle. It is also a way in which God holds the community accountable for what it is about to do to this man. It reminds us of the exact same procedure as the scapegoat ritual of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16. So, after all, we are in the thick of this book on rituals. The man becomes a scapegoat, and as we have learned, a scapegoat has been human societies’ historical attempt to end the cycle of violence. God is intervening here to help the community end the violence. Once started, violence is so powerful that almost all the time we humans are drawn to it and continue to participate in it.

When we read we read v. 21, it should strike us that if it is true that anyone who kills a person shall be put to death, then the whole community, which is engaged in this ritual of exorcising the violence from the community, shall all be put to death. One wonders if God has drawn us into just an extreme situation and dilemma here about violence and revenge, so that our attention is arrested about the problem of bloodshed as a much more profound issue than the blasphemy of God’s name. God is speaking to us in such strong language to turn our attention to a more profound matter.

The narrative of the man stoned in vengeance by the community is a story about the power of God’s name, a story about someone’s meaning and security, and a story about a way

to end the cycle of violence. In the rabbinic tradition there is just this understanding of this text, which in our resistance we have refused to accept in our culture. There is no eye, tooth, limb, or life that ever equals another, so it is impossible for us to consider such a substitution. Vss 21-22 hint at an understanding made much more clear by Jesus in the new covenant. The one rule is quite possibly a foreshadowing of the new rule which transcends merely loving your neighbor into loving and praying even for your enemy.

## The Reign of Reconciliation

**W**hat did the early Christian community understand about this story that we so often miss? In the new covenant God has made more clear than ever that humanity must be brought to a new place, a new way of dwelling together and with God. Paul describes that new creation in 2 Corinthians 5, 17 and that new way of dwelling in Ephesians 2, 19-22. God, who is reconciling all creation to God's self, engages us in God's own work of reconciliation. It is through reconciliation, redemption, and renewal, the three "r's" if you will, of the reign of God, that this all can possibly take place.

God clearly shares this work with us in 2 Corinthians 5, 18-19; we are given "the service of reconciliation" and "the message of reconciliation." First, remember that both Peter (Acts 10, 34) and Paul (2 Corinthians 5, 16) came to understand that God shows no human partiality. God has broken down the dividing walls of human categories: male and female, Greek and Jew, slave and free, or in the case of the Leviticus story, Egyptian and Israelite. God is urging us to consider things in new ways. For Paul in Romans 5, 1-11 the list of those redeemed is amazing to any Jansenist: the weak, the sinner, the ungodly, and even God's enemies.

## The Word of Reconciliation

**T**he phrase in Paul "message of reconciliation" has captured my attention. It is through language and its great power over us that the ministry of reconciliation

is carried out in our apostolates. Martin Heidegger wrote, "Language is the house of being. Man dwells there." It is through language and words that we create our world, give ourselves meaning, and interpret what happens to us. We dwell in the web of words. More than ever in history, our culture in the Information Age is interconnected and networked in words. It is the word "logos" in Greek that is "the message" in our English translation. In our precious blood apostolate of the Word, it seems that our word and witness ought to have such qualities that they are truly words of reconciliation bringing us to a new dwelling place together. .

Year ago at CTU, I discovered a very short essay by Karl Rahner, *Priest and Poet*. He suggested that the word of a priest can be the word of a poet, and that that word is a primordial word. He wrote,

*"There are words which divide and words which unite. . . . words which unravel the whole in order to explain the part, and words which by a kind of enchantment produce in the person who listens to them what they re expressing; words which illuminate . . . . words which delimit and isolate, but there are also words which render a single thing translucent to the infinity of all reality . . . . They bring light to us, not we to them. They have power over us, because they are gifts from God . . . . some words are clear because they are shallow and without mystery; they suffice for the mind . . . . other words are perhaps obscure because they evoke the blinding mystery of things. They pour out of the heart and sound forth in hymns. They open the doors to great works. . . ."*

I have returned frequently in homily preparation to this passage and its implications. It made me wonder that the "word of reconciliation" might have these and other qualities. The Word that can renew the Church and lift up our lives is a poetic word. It evokes deep and true things in and from people. It lifts their lives out of the ordinary and out of the pain, violence, and suffering. The word we speak is primordial; it is the first word God spoke at creation, "Let there be. . ." We too are open to letting there be this other, both victim and perpetrator, making



space and room for them again back in the circle of our company, even the alien and the marginalized. Our word has the quality of the prophetic, not only in being a word of protest for the poor and advocating on behalf of those without words, but also a word envisioning a very different world, a world more closely reflecting the reign of God. Our word is a word of passion, arising out of a kind of anger we experience in our very guts when we encounter and read the signs of injustice that motivate us to action and to compassion. Our word is personal because we do not engage from an aloof distance and security for ourselves, but we are involved in witness at the street level in the lives of people with whom we bear this Word of God. We are the ones who committed ourselves in the Canticle of the Millennium at the 1993 Precious Blood congress even to shedding our own blood.

Finally, this ministry of the word we claim as our apostolate, is not even a word we speak, but the word we attend to, the word spoken to us, and in listening to this Word of God from the mouths of the poor, the alien, and even the sinner, we stand in the awe of silence before this Word.



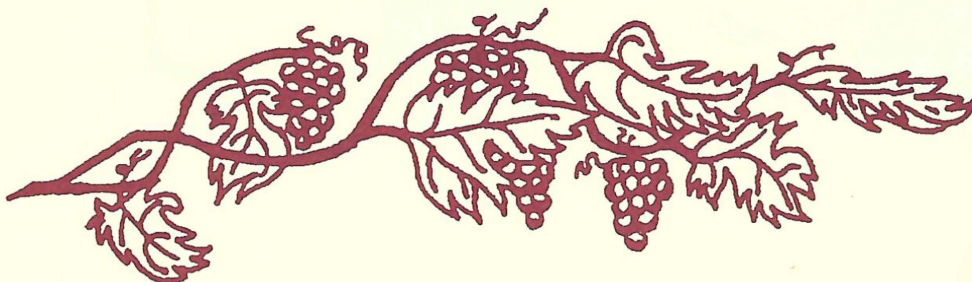
## For Reflection

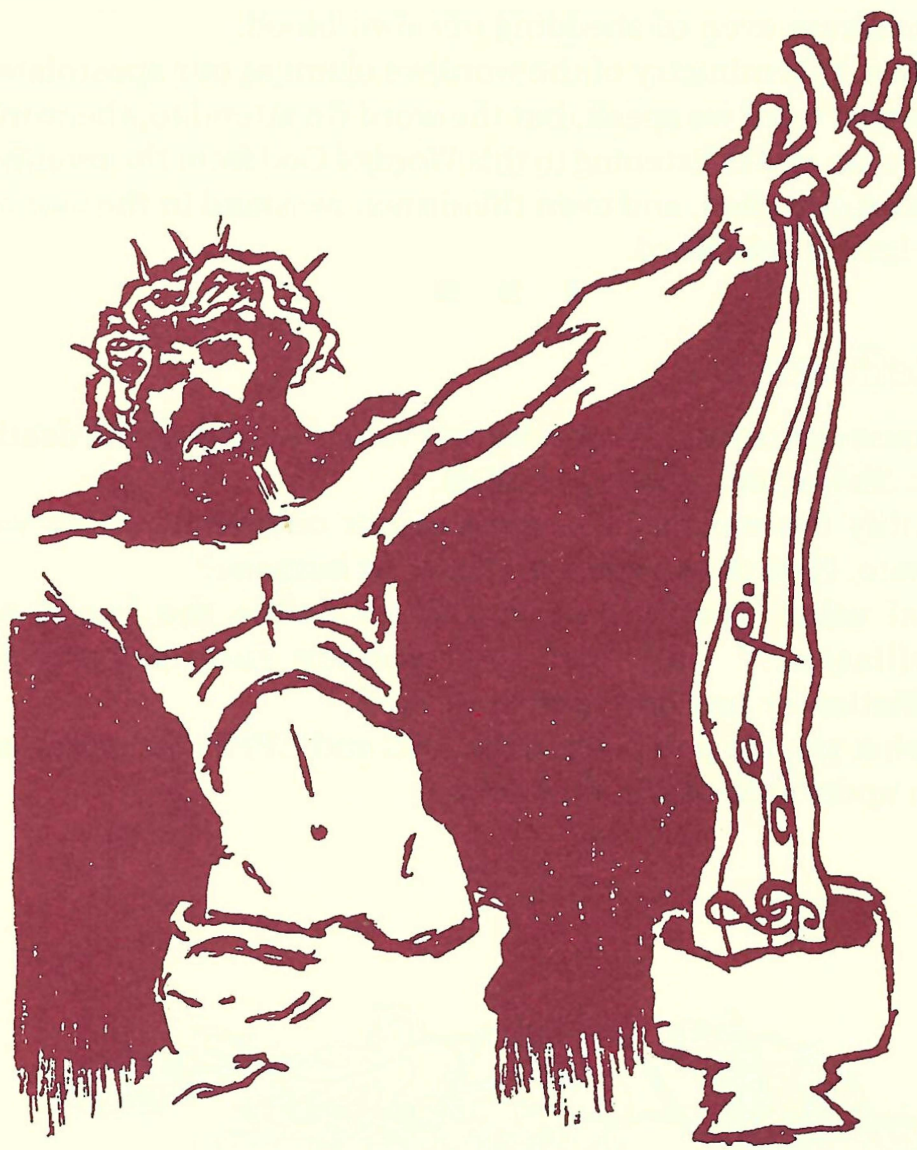
Discuss our culture's attitudes and values regarding the death penalty. Share your personal beliefs.

Identify the violence elements in our culture in which we participate. How does violence attract us humans?

What other qualities do you think define the "word of reconciliation?" Have you ever spoken such a word of reconciliation or had one spoken to you?

In what way do you believe the ASC and CPPS communities have an apostolate of reconciliation?





# Reflection #217

By Terry Maher, CPPS

tears echo in the flowing breeze  
silent screams join the chorus  
and  
running streams nourish  
dry  
blood-soaked earth  
together weaving a fabric  
inclusive of  
holocausts  
burnt offerings of words  
and actions  
of blood-soaked hearts  
that bring reconciliation  
upon the healing altar  
where the GOD presence  
and human-kind meet  
and there is redemption.

# Saved by the Word

By Benita Volk, CPPS

**S**he climbed into her daddy's lap and snuggled comfortably between the metal buckles on the straps of his denim overalls. "Read to me," she demanded. He obeyed. As she followed his finger pointing out the words, she was mystified. How could he turn those funny black squiggles into words? It had to be magic. Her eyes welled with tears of frustration because she was sure she would never be able to do what she so desperately wanted to do: figure out how to make that magic herself.

Of course I eventually did learn to read and write, but at the age of four, words were an impossible puzzle. Though I solved the puzzle, I remain entranced with language. So when Alan Hartway asked me to write an article on "the poetics of word and language," I was both intrigued and stumped. The biggest part of "stumped" had to do with how to fit my experiences of language, specifically poetry, into a journal such as *THE WINE CELLAR*. I solved my dilemma by deciding to discuss the redemptive aspects of writing.

## Writing as Therapy

**W**e all know that writing can be therapeutic. Often we are encouraged to write down our experience to get it out of our system, or to discover just how we feel and what we think. Many people keep daily journals detailing their inner journey as a way of staying centered and aware.

When I was living in Denver, Colorado, I volunteered as facilitator for a group of women writers at the Gathering Place, a daytime shelter for women and their children. The group was meant as therapy. Its intention was not to produce prize winning memoirs or poetry, or even to learn how to put sentences together. The purpose of the writing group was to allow women who had little confidence, sense of self, or skills for living to find their voice (a term that means finding the best style of language to express the true self). Invariably when they found they actually had a voice, they also found they had something significant to say, and that somebody actually found their stories worthwhile. To insure trust and confidence in the group, only three rules were insisted on: 1) participants were never forced to write; 2) everyone was free to read her writing aloud, but no one had to; 3) the group commented only on the positive aspects of the writing—a phrase or sentence that was very strong, a unique expression of experience

As a writing teacher and a member of poetry critiquing groups that evaluated the effect of every syllable and comma, these rules were a new approach to me. However, I very quickly saw their value. They enabled the writers to trust the group; they aided the writers in their ability to communicate experience and put it outside themselves, and eventually they also helped the writers to be more skilled in the traditional sense. The most significant outcome was that the women developed confidence and a sense of self which helped them take control of their chaotic lives.

Alice came to the group just to observe. Like me, she was a volunteer at the Gathering Place. As an artist, she planned to facilitate a group of women who were interested in artistic expression. She had heard that the model the writing group used was successful and wanted to observe it before she started the artist group. I handed her a tablet and pencil. She said again she was only present to observe. “Great,” I said. “But if you feel like writing, your hand will be ready.” I gave the group the “tag,” something like finish this idea... “When

*To find their voice :  
a term that means  
finding the best  
style of language to  
express the true self.*

the wind blows...”

Minutes later Alice was filling up the first page of her tablet and moving on to the second and third. When it was time for volunteers to read aloud, she was the first to read. She had written about her father’s death ten years before and was astonished to suddenly think about it and even more astonished by her emotional response. She thought she had processed the whole experience, but somehow the tag phrase revealed some surprises to her. I saw this kind of experience happen over and over.

How does that work? How is it that people who have looked honestly at their experiences, have journaled them, processed

*I also believe that the less we control our subject, the greater will be the honesty of what reveals itself to us . . . . to tell about what we see, our experiences can be transformed, redeemed.*

them, have moved on, are suddenly surprised by feelings they didn’t know they had? My theory is that giving up conscious control is the key. When we ask ourselves the question, “How do I feel about my father’s death?” we are answering out of a stance of control. We look at ourselves and

figure it out. **WE** do the analysis.

We usually answer in chronological sequence and automatically impose some ordered structure that we’ve learned. But when we approach an experience through the back door, by starting with something as open and seemingly unrelated as “When the wind blows,” we give up control of what will surface. I also believe that the less we control our subject, the greater will be the honesty of what reveals itself to us, if we are brave enough to look. And when we are brave enough not only to look but also to tell about what we see, our experiences can be transformed, redeemed.

I have been writing poetry for as long as I can remember; well, since I learned how to read and write at least! But I didn’t know the truly redemptive quality of writing until about twelve years ago. Somehow my life was just not working right. Things

were terrible. I wasn't miserable, I just lacked zip. I couldn't figure out what was wrong because nothing in particular was out of order. My work was going well. I was living in a good community situation. My prayer life seemed healthy. I had plenty of interesting and loyal friends. My health was great. I could have taken a different job or changed my living situation, but I knew that once the initial renewal of change wore off, I'd be in the same kettle of smelly fish.

I realized I needed something that I could engage in without relying on my friends or community or any other external. So I asked myself what that could be. What gave me a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction and did NOT need outside help? When I asked that question, the answer was easy.

## Writing poetry

All I needed was pencil, paper, a determination to set aside some time, and lots of perseverance. I checked out various poetry writing groups in the area and joined one. I knew that regular attendance would keep me writing. I investigated how to send my work to possible publishers. I bought books designed to start and keep one writing. Until that time, I had been writing when an inspiration hit, which was at best a hit and miss business. Now I was planning to make writing a daily discipline.

And so every day I sat down in my room with the door closed and confronted the blank page. I usually started with no idea, no image, nothing but that glaring white sheet of blank paper. But somehow poems found their way from my unconscious to that blank page, often without a lot of help from my conscious brain. It was as if I prepared a wonderful meal and opened a bottle of good wine, then waited hopefully for the guests to arrive. When they did arrive in the form of images or phrases, I tried to treat them respectfully. I learned that if I was too eager or quick in their presence, they disappeared. I think an image is worth a thousand words, so here's an image to clarify what I mean.

### Taming Poems

They are shy wild animals.  
Sudden movement scatters them  
into the dark like drifting snow.

Caught in the headlights  
of too much scrutiny,  
they freeze  
or are struck dead  
into the ditch beside the road.  
What is necessary  
is the slanted eye,  
cooled blood and breath.  
And most of all  
the opened palm  
smelling of rich grain  
and promising not to close.

I believe everyone can gain something from taking time to write about her life. But of course, not everyone can transform her life by writing poetry. Most people have a strong dislike for the stuff. So why does writing poetry “save” me? I’ll try to explain.

Someone who approaches writing seriously and truthfully grows in self intimacy. I don’t mean a narcissistic wallowing in the mudholes of selfishness. I mean taking time to reflect on the condition of one’s inner experience without reflecting against a person, event or situation external to the self. It involves giving up some control. It requires some sitting still and waiting. It means letting the unconscious surface and not closing our eyes if it’s not the most gorgeous thing in the world. But the benefits are a sense of self acceptance, self love, humility. And we all know the wisdom that says unless we love ourselves, we will have difficulty loving anyone else, including God.

What I want to say is that writing poetry takes me to a place very deep, and it feels good to be there. I come home to myself. At home with myself. I am better able to travel out to other unknown persons and places.

## The Power of Words

**P**oetry has redemptive qualities because it transforms experience. It rarely presents any new ideas but instead takes ordinary things and experiences and uses them to make new connections. Poetry enables us to see the same old thing in a fresh way. Poetry relies on metaphor, and metaphor finds similarities in things that are normally unrelated. Look at



this metaphor: The sun is a raging lion. Lions and the sun are not at all alike in literal terms. But when I compare the sun to a lion, I add dimensions to both the sun and the lion. Both become more than they are in literal language. I begin to see new possibilities and new connections. My experience is expanded and stretched. If I can see similarities between lions and the sun, I am better able to see the extraordinary in the ordinary. The commonplace is redeemed and made bright and more visible.

I didn't start writing poetry because it would save me or transform the ordinary. I started to write because that four year old who was fascinated with words and their power never grew out of that fascination. But as I continue to write and help others write, I'm learning about writing's redemptive aspects as well. As I was working on the final sentences of this article I stumbled upon an essay by Francis Dorff in *Human Development* (Spring 1998) when I found some serendipitous wisdom:

*We do not do this kind of writing in order to communicate with someone else. We write in order to contact and cultivate the stirrings of our own soul. Writing in this way is a private solitary, deeply personal spiritual practice. It is a form of soul-searching that sensitizes us to the subtle stirrings of our own soul and teaches us how to follow their lead to living more soulfully.*



## For Reflection

Tell the story of your experiences with writing. When did the words flow? When did you have writer's block?

Have your writings or speakings made a difference in your own life or in someone else's life?

What does poetry mean for you? What is your favorite poem?

What is your favorite scripture verse?

What would it take to get you to write?

Tell the story of the best letter you ever received.

# His Word Is Power

By Madeleine Kisner, ASC

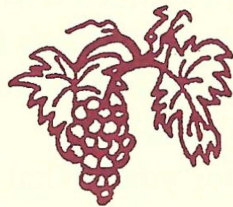
Jesus spoke a word at Cana,  
and water blushed into wine.

Jesus spoke the words, "Rise and walk,"  
and the lame man was healed.

Jesus spoke the word to the Centurion  
and his son became well.

Jesus spoke the words, "Go and wash,"  
and the man born blind could see.

Jesus is the Word made flesh.  
Through Him we are redeemed in the  
Paschal mystery of His Death into Life.  
May His words touch our hearts  
through the scripture and through prayer.  
Only say the word, Lord  
And, we, too will be healed  
in the power of Your word.



# Proclaiming the Word in Our Culture

By Pauline Grady ASC

**S**ister, I want to ask you a question, and it's important. I want to ask you about that program *From Jesus to Christ* that was on public television last night." A few weeks ago, Jeremiah stood by his bed in the cancer ward of the federal prison hospital where I serve as a part-time chaplain. He had just told me sadly that the pain in his chest, recently diagnosed as cancer, was worsening. He was beginning to feel that somehow he has to find out the meaning of his life, and that, for him, some sort of reconciliation is imperative. Having seen several of his friends die of cancer in the past few months, he knows only too well the coming ordeal of chemotherapy and radiation, hope and despair, and finally (he can hardly bear to think of it) of death, which he is now sure will come before he can complete his sentence and go back to his family.

For the first time in his life Jerry is beginning to take seriously the problem of religion. His relationship to his family's fundamentalist faith had been more or less casual. When he broke the law, he figured that he wasn't really a bad guy, and there was plenty of time. He'd think about religion later. But now, instinctively, he began to realize that he had to find out the meaning of the life which he has lived without much thought and with little backing in organized religion. At present, all he could glean from the Christian side of his heritage was to cling to the Bible as a sort of magical icon which gave him a formula for salvation. Simultaneously, other inmates are urging him, with typical insistence, to become a Muslim.

Jerry repeats his question to me: "That program on PBS said that Luke put the story of Jesus' cleansing the temple at the

end of Jesus' public life, and that John put it in the beginning. Which was it?" He was perplexed, a bit petulant, but also sad. "I want to open that book," he pointed to his Bible, "and know that it's really true!"

## The Word of Scripture, Word of Science

**T**here it is, the problem of the typical American religious culture vaguely based on Puritan ideas of righteousness, rather than on the living presence of unconditional love present in the Living Word and processed in the grace life of each Christian. For despite our varied ethnic and faith backgrounds, most of us Americans are spiritual descendants of the Puritans to a greater extent than we admit.

One who shares the Good News in prison meets an acute form of the problem that anyone who proclaims the Living Word will meet throughout our country. In the United States of America many devout and convinced Christians, who feel called to proclaim the Bible to the untaught, whether from the pulpit or in a relationship of teacher to disciple, have themselves experienced the Bible as a crystallized icon rather than as the living Voice of God.

Mainstream Christian churches have largely ignored the obvious religious implications of what natural science and theology are now able to tell us about the age of the universe and the history of life on earth. The mainline churches have not engaged their members in dialogue with either scientists or theologians, ignoring the growing problem of the incongruity of literal or traditional Bible interpretation and scientific thought.

We should restore the focus on the Living Word who speaks through us. In the Bible God reveals unconditional love, made visible in the precious blood. This blood must be heard through the Spirit and translated into the language of the heart.

## Asking the Questions

**H**ow do we bring fragmented people together as a people redeemed by the blood of Christ? We are the Church, and we are called to study and to teach. I

return to Jerry's question, quoted at the beginning of this article. He stands before me ready to outgrow the fundamentalism and literalism that confuse Christian faith with Bible study. He is frightened at the approach of death. His current situation demands that he find trustworthy solutions to his ultimate questions about life's meaning.

Many others, with various religious profiles, also struggle with the same need to move forward toward real understanding of the Living Word without having been given the necessary tools. On the practical level, how do we teach a Bible Christian to listen to God's living voice sung by the Spirit in the heart? How do we respectfully question the Bible as icon and assure the questioners that when that icon has been shattered a basic faith will remain. How do I begin to share the Living Word theologically? How do I tell Jerry that "truth" and "fact" are not the same thing? How can we impart some elementary understanding of the vastness of the universe and the greatness, goodness, unlimited allness of God that would prepare them really to comprehend the vastness of their own freedom that Christ gave us in the paschal mystery?

## Word as Love Poured Out

**W**hat would Jerry make of it if I said that the Word sings to us in the language of mysticism and poetry, rather than speaking to us in the language of business or science, that the Word reverberates to the wide open spaces, the valleys and rivers of our dreams, to measureless light? How do I even begin to help questioners understand that the Living Word is not a mere message, but the unconditional outpouring of love to us by the Triune God, that we must be prepared to listen to and repeat the song with some indication of its boundless message, rather than merely verbalize it?

We show this love in the universe which science and theology are opening out before us. Clearly, the preparation to share the Living Word involves more than doing degree work in Scripture Studies or practicing

*What if I said  
that the Word  
sings to us in the  
language of  
mysticism and  
poetry?*

casuistry with Bible verses.

It means silence: It begins with adoration. And after that? Having partaken of the chalice, I am forced to study and to enter into real dialogue with my questioners.

## Catechesis as Respect

**A**s always, the first word is respect. First of all, anyone who trusts me to lead them into the Word comes to the biblical text to meet Christ who shed his blood for sinners, and every Christian is to be honored for the leap of faith implied in biblical literalism. Lessons I might yearn to give in semantics or literary form to broaden an approach to the Bible must never imply contempt for either the intellectually or the materially poor. Their faith, even if their grasp has limitations, comes straight from the depths of a soul sowed with good seed.

*The Lord  
told us not  
to be too  
quick to  
pluck out  
the weeds.*

The Lord told us not to be too quick to pluck out the weeds. Therefore I must go from the known to the unknown. I take this disciple where she or he is and lead, not force, the journey into the Living Word. I go on responding patiently to questions about the exact meaning of a word in the **King James Bible**, about how “tree” and “cross” can mean the same thing. Or perhaps it’s a problem about how to go about obeying the command, “If your eye scandalizes you, pluck it out,” or a curiosity about whether or when the Apostles got baptized.

I need to school myself to remember that God is never in a hurry and that the Spirit reveals truth gradually and always with respect for human freedom and an all embracing love and compassion. If I hope to be a true reconciler, I must be aware of how Jesus reconciled us in his blood by dying on the cross, not by leaping from the temple to establish his power, as the tempter suggested.

Gradually, the focus changes to matters of the literary form of the Gospel: At this point questions are about the supposed time line of the Gospels seen as biographies. “How come John and Luke have the same stories in different spots in the Gospel?” “How come Luke tells stories the others didn’t, especially about

women and the poor, when he wasn't even there?" The learner has begun to listen to what Jesus is saying to him or her . This phase of focusing on the Living Word instead of the Bible as magic icon.

Another inmate whom I teach is at this point of actualization. Undergoing grievous pain after a failed operation, he is trying to handle what he sees as unnecessary suffering. "I don't understand," he agonizes. "Jesus suffered for my sins already. He loves me, and I can't believe that he wants me to suffer like this." He is beginning to listen to the Word speaking to him. After coming back to faith, this man has been taking biblical correspondence courses continuously for some years. He grew up in Alabama and from time to time went to church with his siblings. His one object now is to master every detail of the Bible text and know the whole Bible, verse by verse, so he can be a witness.

He prays each morning to be humble in his studies. I told him a year or so ago that my prayer for him was that he would not become what the prisoners call a "Bible thumper." He comes regularly to me for answers to his questions, not to swallow them whole, so to speak, but to listen because I don't impose my answers on him. "Some of these people

act like they know everything!" he grouches. "I want you to come to visit me at 1:00 on Tuesdays to help me with my correspondence course." He gets upset when he doesn't get a perfect score on his answers, but he won't give the answer he thinks they want if it is not, in his understanding, the right answer.

With each new realization comes a certain humility that is willing to listen to and evaluate other spiritual people's graced answers, after praying with them. The atmosphere of prison does not lend itself to serious study. The restraints are particularly trying for those with Catholic background. Only patient and persistent praying will let God grace them with one or two bursts of light on favorite Scriptures which will make the necessary

*To "teach" the Bible only  
with utter faith in the  
Spirit, the Water, and  
the Blood, and with  
patience to work with  
God at God's own pace.*

study seem worthwhile.

The question I'm asking is "How does one present the Living Word as unifier and reconciler in our culture?" At this point in my experience I would answer that I dare to "teach" the Bible only with utter faith in the Spirit, the Water, and the Blood, and with patience to work with God at God's own pace, respectfully, patiently, compassionately, humbly.



## For Reflection

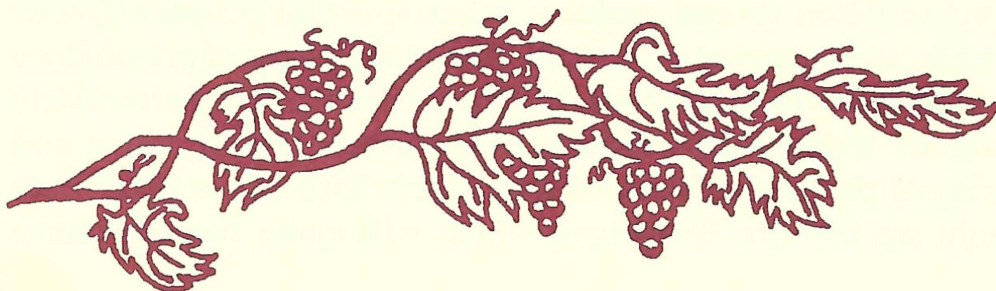
Share your story of discovering the sacred scriptures.

What was it like for you to discover that the Bible is not a science textbook?

What tools or methods do you use to interpret and understand the meaning of the bible? What resource books do you use?

How have humility and respect been a part of your education in faith?

Share your personal involvement in bible study individually or in a group.





# Preparing the Word

By Richard Bayuk, CPPS

**W**riting this article reminded me of the homiletics student who asked the instructor if a good beginning and a good ending would make a good sermon. “Only if they’re close enough together,” came the reply. Given the constraints of space, my goals are necessarily modest: to encourage and affirm the use of homiletic methods in general and to offer one particular model for use by a homily preparation group. I will first outline some of the theological assumptions, which support the proposed methodology; then speak to the necessity of individual preparation as a basis for any group model; and finally explain the group process.

## Preaching: Relational and Communal Activity

**P**reaching is an act which is ultimately relational and always communal. The stories we tell of God, the world, and ourselves are intimately connected and help us to understand, as story is constitutive of being and becoming human. Good preparation for preaching attends to the sources, i.e., all the stories: tradition, experience, and culture.

Experience is the starting point for doing theology. It is the only point of contact we have. It is what we know, the place where God acts. God’s word is an incarnate word, and the language of experience is a language we can all speak. To preach is to uncover what is already present in the very depths of our person, our world, and our relationships. One author calls preaching “the art of naming grace found in the depths of human experience.”<sup>1</sup>

*To preach is to uncover what is already present in the very depths of our person, our world, and our relationships.*

Stories of others and ourselves and God are much more powerful than doctrinal propositions. They are the result of experiences of grace, reflected upon, told, and celebrated. They all begin within human relationships and in this context they are

told. We cannot name grace if we do not experience it, identify it, talk about it, and celebrate it the implications of incarnation: God becomes flesh in history, the Spirit dwelling in the communities of believers who speak the name of Jesus. Preaching is not only an act of naming grace; it is grace itself.

A sacramental imagination makes it possible for us to weave together into one fabric what at times may feel unraveled and disconnected or at least separate. To the extent that we can claim the deeply incarnational and holistic nature of all of life and thus spirituality, we are able to be moved by grace and open to discovering it everywhere. The most authentic voices come from lives that are lived in the belief that grace abounds in every likely and unlikely place, that every aspect of who we are is a part of one person, made in the creator's image.

## **Precious Blood Preaching**

**T**he precious blood spirituality that hopefully informs our preaching is incarnational and holistic. The spirituality of the blood of Christ and the proclamation of the blood of Christ has as a focus the humanity of Jesus, evidenced in his blood. The presence of God and the reality of

*Preachers then, "listen with attentiveness to human experience because they are convinced that revelation is located in the depths of human experience, a mystery that should not come as a surprise to those who profess a belief in the incarnation."*

redemption permeate all of creation; thus preaching is more than some kind of bridge between “sacred” and “profane.”

A sacramental imagination asserts that “God’s word of salvation, hope, healing, and liberation is being spoken in new ways today in people’s lives.” Preachers then, “listen with attentiveness to human experience because they are convinced that revelation is located in the depths of human experience, a mystery that should not come as a surprise to those who profess a belief in the incarnation.” In the specific context of the blood of Christ one might express it like this: “Grace is understood as blood poured out and freely given, a life force that generates and creates life. Grace is incarnate in the life of the community; it is almost something earthy and tangible. Grace comes through the experiences of what is seen, smelled, touched, and heard, especially for this church, the experience of blood in our time and place.”

*Frances de Sales said: “The test of a preacher is that the congregation goes away saying not, ‘What a lovely sermon,’ but ‘I will do something.’”*

In a statement filled with wonderfully Gasparian sensibilities, Dennis Burke writes: “The great preacher must have the heart of a missionary: the burning desire to ride the shoulders of grace as it spins and turns the souls of the hearers to Christ. Preaching is inseparable from the notion of conversion.”<sup>2</sup> If evangelization plays second fiddle to all the other tasks of the apostolate, however, one can more easily neglect serious preparation for preaching and lose sight of the purpose of preaching. I believe that Gaspar and Maria both would feel at home with Francis de Sales who said: “The test of a preacher is that the congregation goes away saying not, ‘What a lovely sermon’ but ‘I will do something.’” Listeners know intuitively when there has been little preparation, for they experience the failure of the preacher to communicate that “This time is sacred. I desire to share with you what has set me on fire.” (Burke 16)

## A Method of the Full Heart

**E**very artist has a method, and preachers are no exception; each needs to develop a method which will facilitate a movement from text/experience/context to homily. This is summarized well in the following: “The most important feature of any method is precisely that it be methodical, that is, orderly and regular. In the preparation of the homily, as in other creative endeavors, the total amount of time we spend preparing may be less important than our observance of a regular pattern of activity spread out over a certain period of time.”<sup>3</sup> That being emphasized, I am not proposing any particular method of individual preparation here. I do, however, encourage a threefold movement within any model. This can be summarized as pray with the text, play with the text, and stay with the text, a process that necessarily unfolds throughout the week preceding the preaching event.

In order to speak with a full heart and a mind that is alive, a preacher must read, observe, and listen. If this is not happening, then the other steps cannot be taken. I mean here more than

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just reading the scriptures as anything that will engage one with the stories of God, self and culture: theology, textbooks, fiction, newspapers, and magazines. A preacher who “does not read is not thinking; not thinking lacks ideas; and lacking ideas, convictions.” (Burke 16) Walter Burghardt

writes, “If I am to persuade, my whole person should be aflame with what I proclaim. If I am to move, the words I utter must be chosen with care and love, with sweat and fire.” Further, “it is not a clever rhetorician the people need, but a holy homilist. Because my homily is a prayer I stand before God in praise of [God], not of my own rhetorical perfection.”<sup>4</sup> If preaching is also prayer, then it needs to come out of the experience of prayer, of life as prayer, of ministry as engagement. Listeners have the right

to witness change and not just be told about it. Unless some of this gets through, the word may be spoken, but probably not heard.

Assuming the above as a given, the first step is to begin with prayer and continue to pray at each stage of preparation. I was startled recently by the following statement: "There is no point in preaching if you do not believe in praying."<sup>5</sup> Yet we know that there must be an explicitly spiritual piece to homily preparation. Even the reading, observing, and listening to which I have referred is a form of this prayer. The U.S. bishops have stated: "The prayer we speak of is not prayer alongside of preparation for preaching, or over and above this preparation, but the very heart and center of the preparation itself. Preachers then are called to a prayerful dwelling with their people and to a prayerful dwelling with the texts of Scripture knowing them and allowing themselves to be known by them."<sup>6</sup> I would hasten to add that this includes a prayerful dwelling with one's own experience and one's own culture in addition to the scripture and tradition. This enables a critical dialogue with and within all three. I believe that we as preachers as well as our listeners know when prayer has been a part of preparation, because the preaching itself will be a form of prayer. I am reminded of the following statement describing the preaching of Maria de Mattias: "While she spoke, therefore, people listened. Rather, they listened to the words that sprang from her mouth, words that came from the Lord, passing through Maria's heart."

## An Imagination at Play

**A**t this point, the preparation has involved praying with the text, reading the text, and letting the text speak. There is no "study" of the text as yet, nor any organized attempt to determine content or design. The second step is play. By this I mean using one's imagination and creativity to connect with one's natural voice, our primary and unique source of expressive power. There are many and various techniques which enable this play. I will briefly describe one that I find very helpful and productive: clustering. This is a kind of nonlinear brainstorming, which puts one in touch with the subject matter of writing or preaching, while generating insight

and inspiration. To create a “cluster,” begin with a nucleus word (taken from the text) such as “fear.” Circle the word in the middle of a blank sheet of paper, and then simply let go and begin to flow with any connections that come to mind, writing the words down rapidly, each in their own circle, radiating out from the center in any and all directions. Connect each new word or phrase by means of a line to the preceding circle. Whenever something new surfaces, begin again at the nucleus word. Resist the urge to make it logical; trust that the experience of randomness is actually a self-organizing process that will in fact lead to a focus for writing or preaching.

Regardless of what “technique” one uses to spark the imagination at this point in the process, the play does in fact eliminate some of the hard work of the third step: to stay with the text, i.e., the study. This is the time when one gets out the commentaries and perhaps some of the better homily services to go into and behind the text. This makes it possible to “stand in front of the text” which is precisely what happens in the group method which includes an honoring of experience and context in order to bring the scripture and tradition to bear on the present.

## A Model of Conversation with Three Partners

**A**s with individual homiletic methods, there are various approaches to group preparation. I wish to propose a method, which is an adaptation of the Jim and Evelyn Whitehead’s model of theological reflection. Their model is made up of three conversation partners: 1) our religious heritage, which embraces scripture, history, and tradition with multiple and changing interpretations; 2) the experience of individuals and the collective experience of faith communities; and 3) the culture, which is made up of the convictions and values that form the social setting, the interpretations which shape the world-view, and the roles and structures that shape social life. I have referred to these three in this article as tradition, experience, and culture. Whether one prepares homilies alone or in a group, all three of these stories need to be considered.<sup>7</sup>

Experience is perhaps the critical voice in the theological conversation, even though it is often the least trusted or most misused. At one extreme we might find an attitude of “I’m right

and you're wrong if you object," and at the other extreme a temptation to ignore or deny experience. Good reflection and homiletic preparation finds a way between the two poles. Experience carries significant weight, because our sacramental imaginations convince us that God's self-disclosure is registered there. Incarnational and holistic preaching comes out of recognition of God's continuing presence among us. The Whiteheads write: "The voice of the tradition enjoys a special authority in our lives, but its privileged position does not replace or substitute for the authority of our own life experiences. These experiences too, have their own religious integrity. Human experience is not transformed by a simple exposure to revelation transmitted within a religious body; our lives are transformed by engaging this tradition."

The advantage of group theological reflection and homiletic preparation is in part that we can listen together and submit our experience to patient scrutiny with others, as we also engage the tradition and culture. All three conversation partners are essential; if any one of them is not included, then the process is open to misdirection. Allowing the tradition to interpret our experience with no consideration of cultural information (e.g., omission of biblical exegesis or understandings of psychology) may cause a drift toward fundamentalism. If our reflection engages only our experience and our culture, while neglecting the scripture text, then our preaching may very well not be explicitly Christian. Finally, if only the scripture/tradition and culture are engaged, without consideration of personal and community experience, the preaching will easily become abstract, irrelevant, and non-engaging. The preaching challenge involves the conversation between all three partners, in the same way that theological reflection leading to sound pastoral insight and action arise out of the same dialogue.

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What might a group homiletic method look like, based on this model? The Whitehead model has identified for us the participants in the conversation: the tradition, the culture, and

individual and community experience. Their method describes the conversation in three steps as the participants just named present their case, engage one another, and move toward a response. Those gathered reflect by means of three movements, therefore: attending, assertion, and response. Attending involves listening to one another critically while suspending judgment, as participants share information available to them in the tradition, in personal experience, and in cultural resources. This requires theological skills of attending (e.g., hermeneutical abilities) and interpersonal skills such as listening well. Assertion brings the different perspectives into a dialogue that can clarify, expand and enrich the theological and pastoral insights of the group, assuming that they are open to sharing convictions and willing to be challenged. The third and final movement is decision and action. In other words, how might we respond in our preaching?

Let me offer a very brief example that may help illustrate this process. March 29, 1998 was the Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year C, with the familiar gospel account of the woman caught committing adultery. The first reading from Isaiah has God speaking of doing “a new deed,” “making a road in the

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wilderness,” and “giving the people to drink.” The psalm speaks of captives being delivered from bondage, of going out full of tears and coming back full of song. Let us assume that the homily preparation group met on Thursday of that week.

Beginning on Monday, participants have individually engaged in the process of pray, play, and stay which I outlined earlier, thus setting the groundwork for the group interaction. As the group gathers on Thursday, they are very much aware of the events of the previous day, when two students gunned down a teacher and four classmates in a small Arkansas town.



Using the Whitehead model and method, we first consider the scripture readings (the tradition). Perhaps the prayer, play and study around the scriptures will have surfaced such points of focus as forgiveness, condemnation, anger, the desire for revenge, punishment, repentance, new life, or healing, to name a few. As participants share their own experiences of these and other realities, and look carefully at how the surrounding culture and prevailing values contain and express these issues, the conversation inevitably turns to the unfolding event in Arkansas. It becomes obvious that this cannot and should not be left out of the conversation. In fact, it has begun to give the reflection and preparation a point of focus which is sharpening the dialogue and strengthening the challenge of the preaching which is only several days away.

The interaction becomes emotionally charged at one point as the issue of the death penalty is raised, an obvious one, given the gospel story juxtaposed with the horrific school killings. One could imagine an intense and productive group session, resulting in compelling preaching which benefited from shared experiences, shared discussion of culture and current events, shared hermeneutics, and above all a shared interpretation of all three, based on bringing them into conversation with one another.

Let me offer here some possible lines from an homily flowing from this hypothetical preparation process.<sup>8</sup> "They had become a mob and their anger was being fueled by a desire to stone this woman to death." "Each of us carries our own stones that we want to hurl at someone or something that has caused us harm or pain. It is a human reaction to want to strike back at whatever attacks us. Having been present the last two days at each of the funerals, I found myself wanting to strike out at someone or something." "I cannot start to throw any stones, because I may be throwing them at myself as well as at each one of you. The shooting not only killed and wounded these youngsters, it also killed and wounded a part of our community." "God still promises to do a new thing for us, and God is working with us through this chaos. Something that has fallen apart needs our attention and care to make it right again. We will eventually find a way to put down our stones and allow our hands to attend to the task of healing and rebuilding."

## Ending Homiletic Isolation

**P**reparation is the foundation of preaching, and this requires the discipline of a method. Regardless of the method one uses, prayer is indispensable, as is recourse to imagination, and a commitment to study. To the extent that we can lessen the experience of “homiletic isolation,” our preparation will be enriched and our preaching invigorated. Thus I encourage the group preparation method, even if it cannot be every week, and sometimes is as simple as two people talking together about their insights for an upcoming sermon. Additionally, the model and method I have outlined here for group use, is not without value for the person preparing alone, to the extent that tradition, experience, and culture should always be placed in dialogue with each other and the preacher.

Underneath and prior to all of this, however, is one more prerequisite. I can best articulate it by recalling the story of the pastor who was invited over for dinner and asked to lead grace before the meal. After the brief prayer, one of the children said: “You don’t talk so long when you’re hungry, do you?” Somewhere we have to feel the hunger for what we are about as preachers, a hunger that makes us committed, unafraid, and willing. Even and especially in the difficult but essential task of preparing to preach the Word.

<sup>1</sup> Mary Catherine Hilbert, **Naming Grace**, Continuum 1997, 44.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Burke, “Why Priests Can’t Preach,” **Commonweal** April 1995, 15.

<sup>3</sup> **Fulfilled in Your Hearing**, USCC 1982, 29-30.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Burghardt, **Preaching: The Art and the Craft**, Paulist Press 1987, 15.

<sup>5</sup> O.C. Edwards, **Elements of Homiletic**, Pueblo 1982, 22.

<sup>6</sup> **Fulfilled in Your Hearing**, 1.

<sup>7</sup> James and Evelyn Whitehead, **Method in Ministry**, Sheed and Ward 1995.

<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to Tim Armbruster who shared with me a homily that he wrote for a pastoral care course at CTU, “Ministry with the Dying and Grieving.” The students were asked to imagine themselves preaching on the readings for Lent 5 in the town where the killings occurred. These lines are direct quotes or adaptations from his paper.

