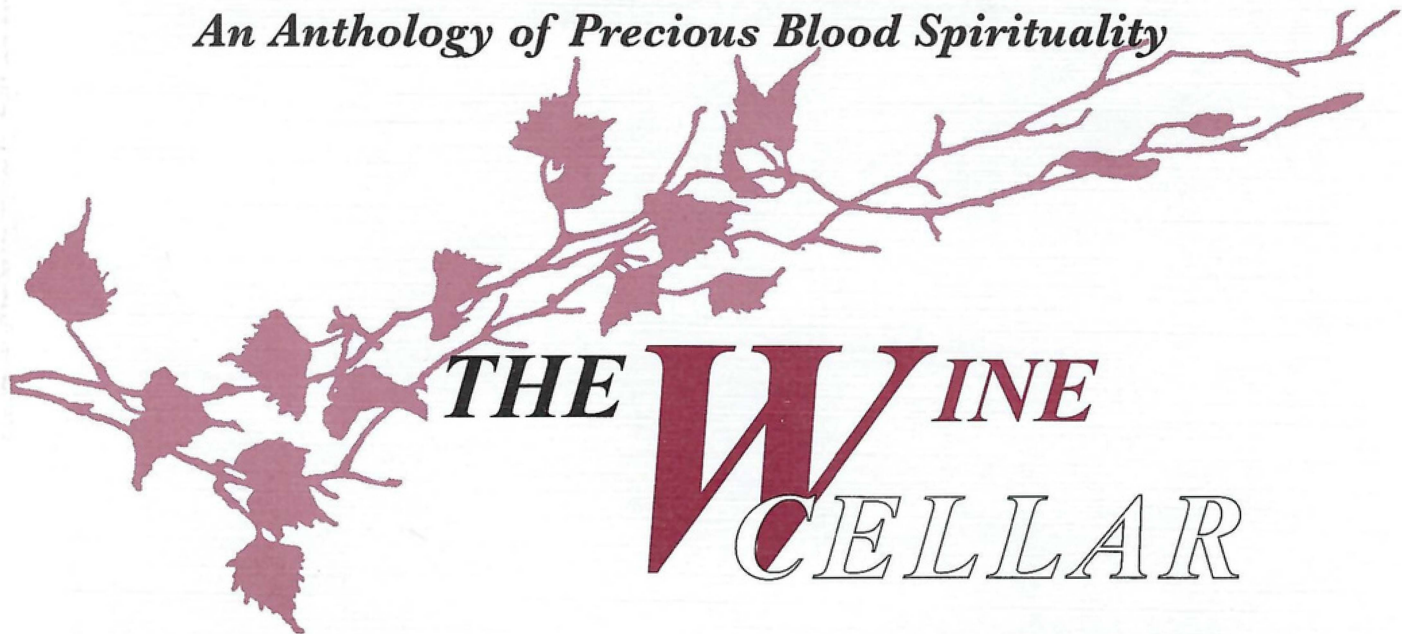
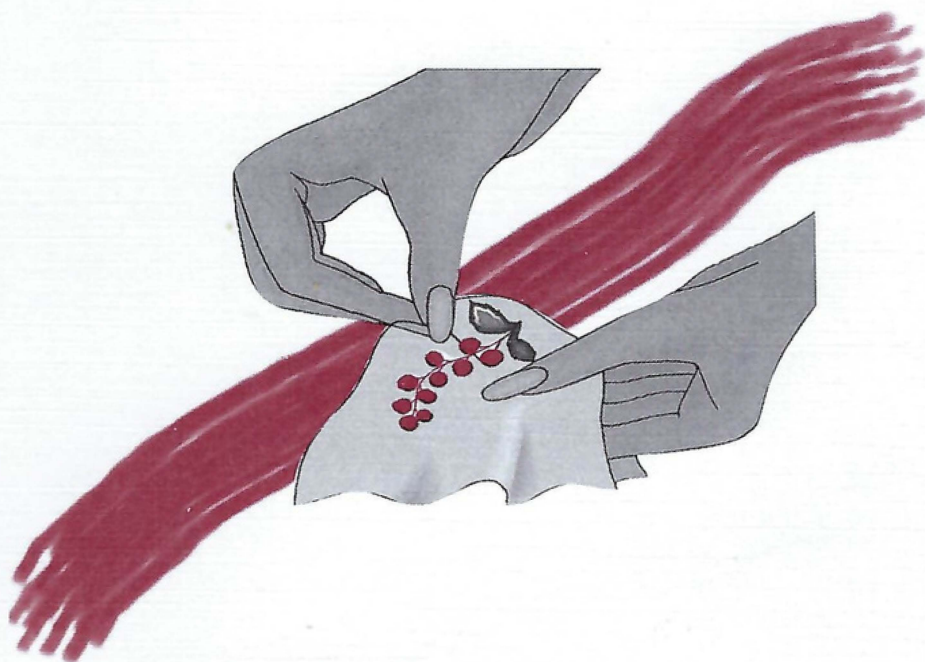


An Anthology of Precious Blood Spirituality



THE **W**INE
CELLAR

Spring 2003 • Number 14



Life
Blood

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

Gaspar del Bufalo

*The
Wine Cellar*

An Anthology of Precious Blood Spirituality

Editor: Joseph Nassal, CPPS

Layout Editor: Timothy Armbruster, CPPS

Editorial Staff: Cathy Fortney and Rosemary Harris

Published by the Kansas City Province

Editorial Address: PO Box 339, Liberty, MO 64069-0339

©2002 by Kansas City Province, Society of the Precious Blood

Printed by Trojan Press, Inc. North Kansas City, MO

Table of Contents

Wine Openers: Ancient Rhythms of the Blood Joyce Lehman, C.PP.S.	<u>4</u>
Life Is In The Blood Dianne Bergant, CSA	<u>12</u>
One Midwife Speaks Out Diana Rawlings, ASC	<u>18</u>
A Call to Arms: The Ministry of Hospitality Janis Yaekel, ASC and Anastasia Rubenecker, ASC	<u>22</u>
Precious Blood, Precious Life Fran Raia, C.PP.S.	<u>30</u>
A Mother's Love: Looking Through a Microscope Jean Giesige, Companion	<u>35</u>
On the Road to Emmaus: The Long Journey Home Frances Flanagan, Companion	<u>40</u>
Listening to the Heartbeat: Nurturing Life In The Blood of Christ Deb Patyrak	<u>46</u>

Wine Openers



*Blood includes us in the Incarnation—
not so crazy, after all,
but an ancient thing, and wise.
The rhythm of life that we carry in our veins
is not only for us, but for others,
as Christ's Incarnation was for the sake of all.*

Kathleen Norris

Ancient Rhythms of the Blood

By Joyce Lehman, CPPS

Being asked to write about how a feminine approach to Precious Blood spirituality might differ from the masculine approaches that have been a large part of our recent literature is kind of like being asked to take a step off a dock into a spring-fed lake. And it is with that same kind of “gulp” that I offer these thoughts—knowing the foolhardiness of it, but just not being able to resist the dare. In the following I will try to lay out several aspects of women’s experience of blood in our own lives, especially rhythms and blood ties, and the attitudes about them from history, culture and religion. What I am offering are reflections or seminal thoughts, not theology, and I offer them in a spirit of invitation to further exploration and articulation. So whether you are intrigued, affirmed, shocked or resistant by what is here, it will have accomplished what I hoped.

In most of the recent writings on Precious Blood spirituality, the focus is on blood shed usually as a result of an act of violence. Responses to this bloodshed have been reconciliation, reparation, healing, and mending what has been rent. With women, the experience of bloodshed is different and can lead elsewhere. Looking at how it has been treated historically might give us some perspective.

Historical Perspective

In *The Chalice and the Blade*, author Riane Eisler explores what we call pre-history, or pre-recorded history, to see what kinds of socio-political structures may have existed. During this time, the author maintains that women were in power in that they directed the way the tribes and societies were organized. Women held power because that they could bleed without dying; they could produce another human being with a considerable loss of blood and still survive to nourish their own. This is the source of the “fertility cults” and the goddess figurines, the few artifacts that survive this era. Women in menses were especially thought to have considerable power: such a woman could not walk the newly sown fields nor attend to a pregnant woman for fear of prompting an abortion. Women were revered to the point of fear...and what we fear we attempt to control.

Whatever those societies actually looked like, whether matriarchal, matrilineal and/or partnership structures, women held a prominent role. In recorded history, however, including Hebrew literature, the role of women is reversed.

As in all patriarchal societies, the official institutions of Israelite culture and religion were androcentric (male-focused); they treated women largely as peripheral adjuncts to men’s lives—an attitude succinctly expressed in God’s creating for Adam a “helper fit for him” (Gen 2:18, author’s translation). Many traditional cultures (today as in times past) seek to confine women to the private sphere, emphasizing their social functions as sex partners, childbearers, and homemakers and their economic functions as cottage-industry workers who bake, cook, spin, or weave in the privacy of the home. Most ancient cultures excluded women, either by law or by custom, from the public domain of religious worship, which comprised a large part of the world of ideas and virtually defined the creative life of mind and spirit. (*The Women’s Bible Commentary*, Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe, Ed., Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992)

Specifically, in Exodus 17 and Leviticus 16:19ff, the blood of animals sacrificed is described as having great ritual benefit where elsewhere the blood of women is the source of cultic impurity. The book of Leviticus is concerned about cultic purity (e.g. Lev 15:19), and woman is seen as the source of impurity for the man. In Deuteronomy numerous passages detail the treatment of women, always emphasizing her secondary status according to the law (e.g. Deut 25:5ff).

Despite the Scriptural reference to “neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (Gal 3:28),” the Catholic church maintained much of Hebrew Scriptures’ attitude. Women have traditionally occupied a subordinate position to the male in church structure that includes women being excluded from all public power roles, most leadership and decision-making positions and all ministerial roles regarding the sacraments (cf. *Creating a Home: Benchmarks for Church Leadership Roles for Women*, Leadership Conference of Women Religious).

The former memorial of the “Purification of Mary” (February 2) celebrated the purification rite required by Jewish law for all women after the birth of a child (forty days for a male child, eighty for a female). This ritual allowed her to be once again a part of the public community after her cultic impurity that excluded her. Mary, who was the mother of Jesus, whom the Church has officially proclaimed the Mother of God and immaculately conceived, was remembered in this memorial as the Jewish mother who had to be declared purified by the institution. Her submission to the laws of the Jewish religion was promoted as a model for women’s submission to the exclusivist laws of the Church. This manipulated thinking holds Mary up for reverence on

The reference to both blood and water makes this event analogous to the water and blood shed in birth, thus Christ takes on the woman’s role of birthing the Church.

the one hand, yet “puts her in her place” on the other, her place being subordinate not only to Jesus but to all males.

A compelling and intriguing image is the piercing of Christ’s side so that “blood and water flowed forth.” The reference to both blood and water makes this event analogous to the water and blood shed in birth, thus

Christ takes on the woman’s role of birthing the Church. An emphasis on Jesus as the human face of God and the male priest as the icon of Jesus sets up a male dominance that first appropriates women’s roles, then excludes women from the spiritual equivalents. In the church, men preside over sacraments that parallel traditional women’s roles, e.g. baptism and birth, Eucharist and feeding at table, anointing and nursing or attending the dying. When women are able to reclaim their natural roles on the spiritual/sacramental level, it would provide complementarity to both the male approach and understanding.

A Blessed Rhythm

Women, even those who have a devotion to the Precious Blood, have a long history of disregarding, if not denying, the power of their own shedding of blood and of the potential “redemptive” aspect of that blood. When women reflect on this experience in their lives, they see that their own blood, “precious in God’s sight,” (Psalm 74) leads them to deeper insight into ways they can express and make effective the Blood of which we want not one drop shed in vain. The menstrual cycle, often called “the curse,” can indeed be “the blessing.”

For nearly forty years of a woman’s life she normally experiences the monthly flow of blood. Its rhythm affects her at a profound level. When the monthly cycle is interrupted it is a sign that something is either terribly right in that new life is conceived and being nourished, or terribly wrong in that the body is signaling something amiss. If a woman is old enough, the skipped cycle might mark the beginning of the end of the fertility of the body and signal the time for concentration on the fertility of the spirit in wisdom, truth and love. This rhythm of the woman’s body is like the cyclic, rhythmic patterns of the earth: day and night, the waxing and waning of the moon throughout the lunar months, the seasons of the year marking preparation, fruition and rest, and the flow of one year into another. Nature’s rhythm and cycles tie the woman to the earth and create in her the desire and passion to care for the living, breathing organism we inhabit. It is no accident that eco-feminism is a discipline in its own right and that women sense a profound care for the earth. We experience a spirituality of the Precious Blood spirituality that supports, embraces and encourages a movement of ecological awareness and activity.

As deeply as women experience nature’s cycles, they experience that spiritual rhythm which is the Paschal Mystery: the redemptive mystery of life, suffering, death and new life in Christ. Immersing ourselves in the Paschal Mystery and allowing ourselves to be drawn further into it allows us to have patience with what appears unfinished. We know that each part of life has its own time, its own place. We recognize that all life comes as birth does, knowing its own time. This mystery immerses the individual into God’s time, in participation in the infinite and eternal that gives perspective to the immediate and the concrete, to the crisis and its consequences, and which allows for endurance and, above all, hope. The most desperate situation can be tolerated because there is both an end and a new beginning. Women recognize that there is value in every situation, even if painful, because it works to create the new form. Women for whom the cyclic rhythms

are a part of their bodies and who birth a new life not their own, grasp deeply the richness of the Paschal Mystery.

A woman's own experience of her blood is that it prepares for and nourishes potential new life. The empty space of the womb fills with nutrient-rich blood. When the space is not occupied and the menses not needed, the body sloughs off the lining and begins to prepare anew. The body works continually to create the environment that would be most conducive to new life, and continually lets go of that which is unused.

Blood Ties

In a real way the mother/child bond is a "blood tie." When the womb is occupied with a fertilized egg, the woman's body welcomes the child, protects and nurtures it. The woman, now mother, ideally begins a deep bonding with the growing child. She learns to listen to this "new" body, both her own and that of the child, and to respond. Like the pelican shedding its blood to feed its young, the new mother gives of her own body and blood to feed her child. This relationship is deep and binding and gives rise to the "mother instinct" so often referred to in literature and nature: the fierce lioness poised to defend her young, the hen hiding her chicks beneath her own body, the human mother who sacrifices her own life to save her child's.

This bond becomes the urge to recognize and develop that same protectiveness for all living things: human, animal, even the life of the living organism that is the planet itself. It is the bond that urges the mothers of Israel and Palestine, Northern and Southern Ireland, South Africa and India to steadfastly stand against all who oppress and violate and kill in order to protect not only their own children, but the children of the tribe, the nation, the very species, on whom hope rests.

With the present crises in the Church and the world, a spirituality of the Blood enriched by women's insights gives us greater creativity in how to address them. In the Church we are caught in the momentum of the wave created by the scandals of sexual abuse by trusted ministers and of cover-up by authority figures. People we work with and minister to struggle with the same stages of death and dying that anyone does in dealing with a significant loss. In this case it is the loss of innocence, a loss of confidence, a loss, not of belief in Jesus, but of belief in an institution and its leaders. Our initial response must be the protection of the children. That "fierce mother-love" should impel us to learn from past mistakes and to work toward creating situations where children can be safe, physically, mentally, sexually, emotionally, not only in the Church but in all of society.

We also companion those whose faith has been severely shaken. Disillusionment is part of the sometimes traumatic process of transition and change. With wisdom from the experience of the rhythm of the Paschal Mystery we offer insight so that the transition will be into a more mature and healthy faith.

And finally the Power of the Blood can help us journey with those who have oppressed either through abuse of another's body or the abuse of power. We call them to life and healing, to truth and reconciliation. The mother of a criminal never loses the sense that the life of her child is to be respected and protected as well.

With the present crises in the Church and the world, a spirituality of the Blood enriched by women's insights gives us greater creativity in how to address them.

Creative Responses to Conflict

In our nation and the world, we struggle with a response to terrorism, oppression and violence. We hear our national leaders beat the drums for war with terrorists, and arbitrarily with Iraq, and we work to gather others to plead for sanity and peace. Those who protest against war are given, and rightly so, the challenge to provide an alternative for dealing with the precarious situation that the possibility and availability of nuclear and biological weapons creates.

The Precious Blood calls women to dig deeply within our own experiences to see what methods might be offered. Because women are generally physically weaker than men, we have had to find means other than brute force to protect self and children. Women in Calcutta, India, when threatened by a gun-carrying official trying to force them from what was their home on the streets began singing and clapping. The more he shouted and threatened, the more they continued singing. As he forced his way into the throng, they surrounded him without touching him, continuing to sing and clap. The surprised and disconcerted official gave up his efforts.

In South Africa a shanty settlement was threatened by bulldozers brought in to raze it. The women, aware of the sensibilities of the white Afrikaaners continued to chant while the dozers roared toward them. At one point they stripped off their tops and began to dance. The offended drivers stopped, reversed the machines and left the area (cf. *Engaging*

the Powers, Walter Wink, Fortress Press, 1992). It is this kind of “out of left field” creativity that is required of people devoted to the Precious Blood who refuse to let the blood of the innocent, or the guilty, be shed.

A situation of a totally different kind, yet as keenly felt, is that regarding the Eucharist and indeed most of the sacraments of the Church, which are being held hostage to the church discipline of a male celibate priesthood. On one level this is a structural situation—where

power is held and where control is exercised.

On a more fundamental level, it is a call to feed the hungry. Women have traditionally cooked and laid the table whether the men hunted and provided or the women did the gathering. Today we see people, especially of economically developed nations, experiencing extreme hunger and thirst for meaning, for relationships and belonging, for wisdom, truth and love.

*Especially
because of our
devotion to the
Blood we need
to be sure that
all of the
hungry are fed...*

Access to the nourishment of the Eucharist is of the utmost importance and we cannot wait. “Do we really have the right to cast the first stone at the sinful woman who stands accused before the Lord and is called the Church,” Rahner asks, “or are we now accused in her and with her, and delivered up

to Mercy for good or ill?” (*Toward a New Catholic Church* by James Carroll).” Especially because of our devotion to the Blood we need to be sure that all of the hungry are fed; we need to be as persistent as the widow of the gospel (Lk 18:1-8) and as wise as the father who feeds his son (Mt 7:9).

Devoted to the Precious Blood of Jesus in this day and age, we are called by the crazy, ancient rhythm of blood coursing through our veins to accept and explore our own experiences of blood, to see where and how they are different as well as complementary, and where and how they enrich and encourage the application of the Power of the Blood today. When we do, we will sing with William Cowper, “Redeeming love has been my theme, and shall be till I die” (cf. song, “There is a Fountain Filled with Blood”).

RESOURCES

- Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith**, Norris, Kathleen; Riverhead Books, New York, NY, 1998
- Creating a Home: Benchmarks for Leadership Roles for Women**, Merkel, Jeanean D. ed., LCWR, Silver Spring, MD, 1996
- Engaging the Powers**, Wink, Walter, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1992
- The Chalice and the Blade**, Eisler, Riane, Harper, San Francisco, 1987
- The Women's Bible Commentary**, Newsom, Carol A. and Ringe, Sharon, H. eds. Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1992



For Reflection

If you are a woman, how has your experience of blood affected your life? If you are a man, what is your attitude concerning women's experience of blood as you know it?

What relationship do you see between women's bloodshed and the bloodshed of Jesus?

Where do you experience the Power of the Blood in your life? What does it urge you to do?



Sister Joyce Lehman is a member of the Dayton (OH) Precious Blood community. She is Director of Pastoral Planning for the Diocese of Toledo and works as a facilitator/consultant with communities of women and men religious. She is a spiritual director and gives retreats and workshops. Previous ministries include congregational leadership, parish pastoral associate, university campus minister and high school teacher.



Life is in the Blood!

By
Dianne Bergant, CSA

Many people live today in what can only be referred to as an “antiseptic world.” They insist that almost everything and everyone be clean and wrapped in cellophane. Bodily fluids should never be mentioned, natural body odor never acknowledged. While it is true that sanitary precautions must be taken lest disease spread, there is often an underlying attitude that seems to deny the messy nature of the human body. This is unfortunate because, we are, after all, made of the stuff of the earth, and that stuff can sometimes soil our hands without endangering our health.

The vital character of blood is recognized by all. However, it plays a particularly significant role in the lives of women. In this regard, the attitudes toward menstruation and giving birth that a society imprints on the psyches of its young girls will influence the way its women understand themselves. Some traditional societies have a high regard for menstrual and birth blood and they surround it with meaningful rituals. On the other hand, Western societies have often referred to menstruation as “the curse,” and have treated it and the women experiencing the flow accordingly. Though there are no explicit statements in official Roman Catholic theology that discriminate against women because of these natural processes, over the years more popular thought has produced many very biased attitudes and customs. An understanding of the origin of some of these attitudes might help to dispel some of the biases.

Blood Rites

*Blood was thought to
be the bearer of life,
and so the Israelites
considered it sacred.*

In order to understand ancient Israel's attitude toward menstrual or birth blood, we must look first at two different but related concepts found in the writings of ancient Israel: the role played by blood generally; and the notion of holiness. Blood was thought to be the bearer of life, and so the Israelites considered it sacred. Their belief in blood's vital power explains its use in rites of purification and sanctification. The first and probably most important blood-rite was the ceremony of sealing the covenant. The account of the events that took place at Mount Sinai include the following graphic report:

*half of the blood [Moses] dashed against the altar...
Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said,
"See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with
you...(Exodus 24:6, 8).*

The covenant partners, God (represented by the altar) and the people, were sealed by the blood of the covenant sacrifice. Blood-rites were also used to purify a person who has recovered from a disease, particularly from leprosy:

*He shall sprinkle [the blood] seven times upon the one who has
been cleansed of leprosy (Lev 14:7).*

It also played an important role in rituals of atonement:

it is the blood that makes atonement (Lev 17:11).

Here we see that blood, which contains the life force, exercises power over death. In opposing death, it also opposes the sin and evil that lead to death. Thus it atones for or wipes away the guilt of the sinner.

Blood as Sacred

The second concept to be examined is the notion of holiness. Biblical holiness is really a ritual condition, not a matter of moral integrity. It is first and foremost an attribute of God, and it requires that only what is holy can stand before the all-holy God. However, persons, places, and things that are not holy by nature can be made holy by means of purity rites. These rites qualify a person or an object for participation in the cult.

Another way of understanding this concept might be to look at the question of ritual impurity or pollution. Simply stated, pollution occurs when the boundaries of nature have been crossed. For example, fish are meant to live in water. If they cross the boundary of their

*Biblical holiness is really a ritual condition,
not a matter of moral integrity.*

classification and crawl on land as shellfish do, they are considered impure or unclean. Or, bodily fluids belong in the body. Therefore, uncontrolled bodily emissions make one ritually unclean.

This background should help us to understand better why, despite its fundamental sacred character, there are two situations in which blood appears to contaminate rather than purify. The first situation is unjustified homicide. All cultures maintain that the unwarranted shedding of the blood of another is a serious offense against God. We see this explicitly stated in the story of the covenant made after the flood when God tells Noah:

"I will require a reckoning for human blood (Gen 9:5)."

In the story of Cain and Abel, the blood itself cries out for redress:

"Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground (Gen 4:10)."

We read further that the reckoning that is exacted in the shedding of blood was the offender's blood:

"Whoever sheds the blood of a human by a human shall that person's blood be shed (Gen 9:6)."

It is not hard to appreciate why the people thought that the blood shed in unjustified homicide would contaminate. Neither the people involved nor the things touched by such blood were fit for the worship of God. It was not so much that the blood was emptied of its life force as it was that the life force was violated in the murderous emission of the blood.

Menstrual or Birth Blood

The second instance of apparent contamination is not as easily understood. Menstrual or birth blood also rendered one unqualified for participation in ritual:

When a woman has a discharge of blood that is her regular discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening (Lev 15:19).

If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonial unclean seven days...If she bears a female child, she shall be unclean two weeks (Lev 12:2, 5).

This may sound like a gender bias, unless we understand something of

the ancient concept referred to by anthropologists as “spiritual communion,” that is, engagement with essential activity of the Creator. There are three basic experiences that place human beings in such a state: legitimate sexual relations; the hunt; and worship. In each one of these instances, human beings participate in divine or creative activity that is linked with life and death. The power released in any one of these activities was considered to be so great that the mixing of powers constituted a mortal danger. For this reason, men engaged in the hunt refrained from sexual activity; women whose blood carried the potential for new life did not cross the line into cultic participation; generally, priests were not involved in the hunt.

From this we might say that under certain circumstances, ritual impurity might be considered a state of power rather than one of pollution. Such an understanding of impurity is clearly seen in later rabbinic writing according to which the handling of the sacred biblical texts rendered one’s hands ritually unclean. Defending the sacred of the Song of Songs, the great Rabbi Akiba argued:

Heaven forbid! No one in Israel ever disputed that the Song of Songs defiles the hands. (Mishna Yadaim, 3:5).

If Israel possesses some of the concept of “spiritual communion,” its rituals of purification may reflect belief that direct contact with divine power could be dangerous if sustained too long. If this is the case, it would mean that, as a result of menstrual or birth blood, women carried divine power within their bodies and not the seeds of defilement. Furthermore, when they participated in purification rites, they were crossing the boundary that separates participation in this divine power from the realm of the human.

...as a result of menstrual or birth blood, women carried divine power within their bodies and not the seeds of defilement.

This explanation of the power of menstrual or birth blood does not resolve the paradox that remains. Female blood has always made a woman very mysterious, for, unlike a man, she bleeds regularly, but does not die. However, emission of her blood situates the woman closer to death and the pollution associated with it than to life. This is due to the fact that menstrual blood is sloughed off by the body when new life has not been conceived, and the fact that birth blood is what remains after new life has taken what it needs. In a sense, both are instances of

dead blood and, because such blood is associated with death, it is considered polluted.

Jesus and Ritual Impurity

For most Christians the issue of menstrual blood calls to mind the account in Mark's gospel of Jesus' healing of the woman who suffered from hemorrhage (Mark 5:25-34). The very popular

This story shows that the power of Jesus crosses the boundary that separates the clean from the unclean, the ritually pure from the polluted.

misperception of the biases surrounding ritual impurity becomes for many the focus of the narrative when, in fact, the major theme is the boundary breaking nature of the saving power of God.

The woman had been hemorrhaging for twelve years. The presumption is that this was menstrual flow or, as identified above, dead blood. One might say that, because of her affliction, she was carrying death within her. This prevented her from contributing to the future of the community. She had been the victim of both her ailment and those who attempted to heal her. Her funds had been depleted and she was ritually unclean. Perhaps as a last resort, she reached out and touched Jesus, and

immediately her hemorrhaging ceased and she was cured.

This story shows that the power of Jesus crosses the boundary that separates the clean from the unclean, the ritually pure from the polluted. It is the only story in which Jesus did not consciously exercise his power. Instead, the woman reached out and seized it without any decision on Jesus' part (v.28). This was certainly a bold move. We realize just how bold it was when we remember that it was a woman who did this. In traditional societies women are normally not this aggressive. At the time of Jesus, the woman's action would have been quite inappropriate.

The woman's flow of blood made her ritually impure, and it also transferred this impurity to any and all who touched her. The disciples comment on the pressing nature of the crowd (v.31). Presumably, the crowd would have been pressing in on her as well. Her action was doubly inappropriate, because she would have been polluting many in the crowd. This story is but one that illustrates how divine power is not confined to the constraints of the custom, even religious custom. Ritual

impurity did not hinder the saving power of God in her life. The approbation of Jesus is seen in his words: “Your faith has made you well (v.34).” Faith, not a purification rite, restored her.

Contemporary Spirituality

Just what does all of this have to do with contemporary women? I would think that it is very difficult to appreciate the power of the Blood of Christ while at the same time despising one’s own blood. Although menstrual flow signals the end of a period of fertility, it also alerts us to the beginning of another one. As regards birth blood, it is no longer needed because it has accomplished its miraculous task; new life has finally been born. Both menstrual and birth blood remind us of the powers of life that move within us. They remind us that we are indeed in “spiritual communion” with the Creator. How could this possibly be considered a “curse?”



For Reflection

What do we mean when we say, “life is in the blood?”

In what explicit or subtle ways does society, particularly through its advertising, demean female blood?

In what ways might women today celebrate the powers of life that are contained within female blood?



Dianne Bergant, CSA is Professor of Biblical Studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. She writes the weekly column The Word for America magazine. She is currently working in the areas of biblical interpretation and biblical theology, particularly issues of peace, ecology and feminism. Besides numerous articles, her publications include: Song of Songs: The Love Poetry of Scripture. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1998. Preaching the New Lectionary (Year B). Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999. Preaching the New Lectionary (Year C). Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000. Preaching the New Lectionary (Year A). Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001. People of the Covenant: An Invitation to the Old Testament. Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 2001



One Midwife Speaks Out

By
Diana Rawlings, ASC

Let's be clear from the beginning, I am not a midwife by profession. Midwives help in the birthing process. They stand ready with assistance and affirmation offering direction and support as new life enters the world. A midwife's contribution is more about encouraging and helping new life come forth from another. That's what I'm attempting in our discussion of female insights and understanding Precious Blood Spirituality.

The following reflections come from various sources and are shared with the hope that they foster new life. Welcome to the birthing room!

Let me share a bit of history on how some of these ideas were conceived. Each year the Precious Blood Vocation Formation Conference (PBVFC) meets. Membership includes the Vocation and Formation Directors from the four Provinces of the Missionaries; the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood in O'Fallon, Missouri; the Sisters of the Precious Blood in Dayton, Ohio; and my own Congregation, the Adorers of the Blood of Christ.

Three years ago the Precious Blood women who participate in the PBVFC spent an afternoon together sharing our insights as women united in Precious Blood spirituality. Last year a group of my peers dedicated a weekend to sharing personal experience and reflections about the same topic.

Some of the sage insights offered by these Precious Blood women are presented here. I've also included a few descriptions from other sources identified in the endnotes. At the end of each sharing you'll find a question offered to help with your reflection or discussion with others.

"We bleed. There just isn't anyway of getting around it. Women bleed. We bleed in secrecy, for the shame surrounding the monthly flow of women's blood is still virulent. When we are taught that something has to be hidden, we naturally believe it contains an element that is not acceptable to other people..." (1)

Have you ever told your menstrual story? If so, how was it received? If not, what has prevented you from doing so?

“Listen to the terms used: ‘I’m on the rag’; ‘granny came today’; ‘I have the curse’; ‘it’s that time of month’. How horrible is this when I have to use a coded language to tell someone what I’m experiencing in my body!” (2)

What description did you use to tell people you were menstruating? Why did you use that term? What feelings do you experience now realizing you used a coded language?

“I would focus on the physiological/biological components of blood that are shared human experiences and then those that are unique to women. For example, the umbilical cord which is our first experience of connection and shared life blood...I would move to the blood imagery that is particular to women such as menstruation, birth, cycles, menopause. From there proceed to the blood of sacrifice, uniting our experience of suffering with women world wide who suffer persecution, for example mothers of those who have disappeared, Muslim women who have been victims of rape...” (3)

What cycles has your spirituality taken as you consider significant life changes? If you have stopped menstruating what has been this experience for you?

“In the Navajo tradition the umbilical cord is buried in the earth. This marks home; a tie between the one born and the earth. The Navajo’s have a puberty ceremony that lasts for three days to honor a woman’s first menstruation. They honor and reverence the girl child as she begins her life as an adult woman.” (4)

How might life have been different if your first menstruation was celebrated? Was this coming of age acknowledged? How?

“The Missionary men say the first cry of the blood was the murder of Abel. It was an act of violence. But really, the first cry of the blood was in giving birth to Cain. It was a cry mixed with pain and joy as she welcomed her son.” (5)

What new life has birthed in you that was mixed with pain and joy? How might the expression of our spirituality change if we promoted the cry of joy in life?

“When I hear the words cry of the Blood I automatically hear the cry of Eve and remember that she physically lost part of herself in the act of giving life. This happens to me each month as I loose part of myself when I bleed. Maybe the Precious Blood family could sponsor an annual blood drive as a way to reflect on what it means to physically give away part of my body.” (6)

Have you lost a body part, for example, a breast or had a hysterectomy? What does this mean as a woman of the Precious Blood? When was the last time you donated blood?

“Most everyone has sung the song with the refrain we are stained in the blood... Let me tell you that song is distasteful to me. In high school when I would have my period, I would flow so heavily that my clothes would get stained. It was horribly embarrassing to have one of my classmates tell me there’s blood on the back of my skirt. I’d have to go home and change clothes but first would have to get permission to miss class, leave school, call one of my parents to come get me, then have some of the kids notice I was wearing something different. I might just as well have worn the letter B announcing me as a bleeder. So don’t sing to me of the wonders of being stained in the Blood!” (7)

Is there a time in your life when blood stained you? What are your feelings about that time?

“As a lesbian sister I feel my blood-bond is with the outcast. I am not publicly welcomed in Church. I am described ‘intrinsically evil’ by some. It has been years since I heard an Offertory petition that acknowledged my reality or celebrated my sexual orientation. So yes, I meditate often on my bond with the outcast.” (8)

Have I experienced being an outcast? By whom and for what?

“I have never conceived, but whether or not a woman conceives, she always carries the germinative ocean within her, and the essential eggs. Whether we are weaving tissue in the womb or images in the imagination, we create out of our bodies...” (9)

Who or what have you birthed in your lifetime; a dream or idea that moved into a reality? How was this created out of your body?

These are just a few of the comments shared by blood-sisters struggling to articulate the richness in being a woman of the Precious Blood. No doubt there are more stories to tell. Wouldn't it be great at the next Precious Blood Congress to carry on this birthing process by creating a safe space for us women to meet and tell our blood-stories? This could become our own 'Red Tent' as we shared our story. (10)

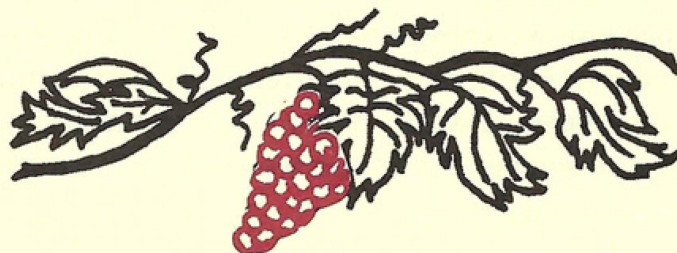


ENDNOTES

1. A Woman Bleeding: Integrating Female Embodiment Into Pastoral Theology and Practice, *Leslie Smith Kendrick, Ph.D., The Journal of Pastoral Care, summer, 1994*
2. *Peer group conversation; Summer, 2000*
3. *Personal reflection, Janet Watson; Spring, 2000*
4. *Precious Blood Vocation Formation Conference (PBVFC) conversation; Fall, 1998*
5. *PBVFC conversation; Fall, 1998*
6. *PBVFC conversation; Fall, 1998*
7. *Peer group conversation; Summer, 2000*
8. *Peer group conversation; Summer, 2000*
9. *The Mother's Songs: Images of God the Mother, Meinrad Craighead.*
10. *The Red Tent: A Novel, Anita Diamant; 1997; pp. 170-173.*



Sister Diana Rawlings is vocation director for the Adorers of the Blood of Christ, United States Province. She has been a vowed member for 29 years, serving in community leadership from 1990-96 (Wichita Province). She has also served in the communications office for the Archdiocese of Omaha, NE from 1987-1990, taught at Newman University in Wichita, and at Bishop McGuinness High School in Oklahoma City and Bishop Carroll High School in Wichita. Sister Diana served on the Precious Blood Task Force from 1989-1994.



A Call to Arms: The Ministry Of Hospitality

**By
Janis Yaekel, ASC
and
Anastasia Rubenacker, ASC**

In 1775 Paul Revere took a midnight ride calling the citizens of Boston to arms. He was not in a very hospitable mood. He was encouraging the citizens to pick up weapons to fight the British.

In our most recent history, since September 11, 2001, we have heard the call to arms over and over again. The arms of 2003 are quite different from the arms of 1775. Instead of flintlock rifles, pistols and a few cannons, today we have smart bombs, remote controlled flying drones loaded with explosives and patriot missiles. From great distances we send out arms hurling into space and in minutes they leave within their wake destruction and death.

We sit in our homes and watch the evening news, shaking our heads at the reports of war. It seems our country has taken up a position of protectionism, and in the process we seem to be isolating ourselves from the rest of the world. More and more people have been scratched off our welcomed guest list. In turn we are less and less welcome on the doorsteps of our neighbors. We watch, we sigh, and we worry when we look at this world picture.

We worry because we know what it's like to be unwelcome. We have experienced it in our homes or our religious communities, our churches or in our places of work. What we see on a national and international stage frightens us because we know the pain and suffering that this type of behavior inflicts.

An Open Arms Policy

Amid this present day culture of war and revenge Jesus still calls us to proclaim a different message, a different call to arms. Christ urges His followers to depart radically from the culture of exclusion and to maintain a culture of hospitality, an atmosphere that speaks welcome to all.

This is no easy task. To become hospitable people means that we too need to stop pulling the triggers of word, body language or deed that protect and isolate us from our neighbor. We need to open wide our arms to embrace our sisters and brothers, an embrace that will radiate warmth, speak acceptance and love, and pulse with sincere welcome. This stance of welcome is frustrated too often because we have consciously or unconsciously espoused the philosophy of “my space, my place.” We watch television in different rooms. We eat at different times. We go and come and make decisions without thinking about anyone else. We drive by ourselves in our cars. We talk about how busy we are or how important our work is but in our own homes and

We need to open wide our arms to embrace our sisters and brothers, an embrace that will radiate warmth, speak acceptance and love, and pulse with sincere welcome.

communities we are unable to see the Christ-guest because we are not available.

When we are able to offer true hospitality to the strangers at our door they will feel celebrated and whole. They will not be made to feel like their arrival is an intrusion but rather a cause for rejoicing. In the arms of warmth and hospitality of the host the strangers have the freedom to be themselves. The embrace of the host provides an atmosphere that is expansive and open and secure.

A “Welcomed” Experience

There was an aged sister who was hard of hearing. She lived in her community’s retirement home in northern Indiana. Every day during the Eucharist she did something rather extraordinary. It was something that most people would not have even been aware except for the fact that her hearing impairment caused her to speak a little louder than normal. Every day when the priest came to offer her

the body of Christ she held out her hand and received the host. What was unusual was that her response was not "Amen." Rather with great joy and a goodly bit of gusto she responded, "Welcome, welcome." One could not miss the excitement in her voice at being able to offer hospitality to her Savior. How comfortable she seemed to have made it for Him to enter her heart. She understood how much Christ longs to be welcomed unreservedly. The word "welcome" seemed to roll off her tongue as a word does when it has been used over and over again. Without saying another word one sensed that this was a person who practiced the art of hospitality throughout her life.

This is the sense of welcome that we hope to offer to those around us. This is a welcome that says, "my home is your home," "mi casa es su casa."

*Hospitality is
the welcome
that we offer
to those just
outside of
arms reach*

This is the welcome that reflects the offer of friendship. This welcome is offered when we see beyond the dress, the hairstyle, and the color of skin and behold the incarnation of Christ in the person at the door.

Invariably some dying is involved in seeing this Jesus. We may be called to let go of old fears. We may be called to stretch out our arms with hands open, not holding on to our way of doing things, our space, our time. When the Christ guest comes we are often asked to be available to the person and that implies that control of the

situation has to take a back seat. This open arm policy may even suggest that at times we have to receive from the guest; this often leaves us with the very uncomfortable feeling of being indebted to the guest.

With arms outstretched in availability we are called to offer hearth and heart to the stranger. They may be the new people in the office or a refugee from Bosnia. They may be the familiar strangers, the people living with us in community, a family member, or a neighbor whom I have never really taken the time or expended the energy to know. Hospitality is the welcome that we offer to those just outside of arms reach. Hospitality connects sacrifice to smile, presence to patience, and host to home in the eye of the guest. This hospitality that we offer to those around us is the hospitality that we offer to Christ.

In this "called to arms" we will bleed a little as we offer our time and attention to the guest.

Hallmarks of Hospitality

Hospitality starts with being sensitive to the guest. It is about being attentive so that you will know what will make the guest feel safe and secure. Sometimes being present to the face of Christ is not so much about doing as it is about being. In the story of Mary and Martha we see that the listening presence that Mary makes available to Jesus draws from Him not only words of praise but grace as well. While Martha is busy doing what she thinks needs to be done, Mary's availability allows Jesus the opportunity to be what He wants to be. Mary's warmth of presence is more essential to Jesus than Martha's household chores on this occasion.

At another time it was more the actions of Mary that spoke hospitality to Jesus. Near the time of His death it is Mary who ministers to Jesus by anointing Him with oil. Now Mary doesn't listen, she acts and again she makes the right choice. On this occasion the good hostess takes action, sensing what the guest needs most.

Hospitality is concerned with openness. It is not about control but community building. Hospitality allows the guest to come in and rearrange our homes. This aspect of hospitality is often perplexing for the host. We can imagine what it would be like if someone comes into our home and starts to change our pictures around or move the furniture or rearrange our closets. We would be hard pressed to allow that to happen. The welcome mat would be pulled out from underneath that caller's feet rather quickly. Yet inviting the Christ guest into our midst requires this kind of openness.

Jesus was always the guest, always looking for a place to lay his head. He had no house. He did not have his own donkey. He did not grow his own food. Yet when he came into a house whether by the invitation of the owner or by his own suggestion, as in the case of Zacchaeus, it was Jesus who brought change. He healed, he taught, he loved and if the hosts were receptive He would transform them forever. On the other hand, Jesus could work no miracles in the homes of the rigid and righteous because they were not willing to grow, to be flexible, or to accept a new way of looking at the world.

Christ doesn't just ask to come in. He asks if we will allow Him to make a difference. In every person that comes our way the imprint of Jesus can be found and these faces will also ask us to change, to adapt, and to be flexible.

*Hospitality is
concerned with
openness.*

In speaking of a community where she once lived, a sister related to us the following episode. When a new member came to live in this community all of the silverware, the dishes and kitchen utensils were taken out of the cabinets and put on the table. Together they would decide where everything would go so that the new person would have an equal opportunity to give input. Things may or may not have ended up in the same location but now the kitchen would not be a booby trap of control within the community. Everyone may have had to hunt around for things for a time but no one would be able to say, "This is where you should have put this or this is where we always keep that." How many of us would be willing to go that length in making another person feel welcome?

Hospitality is an expression of love. The Greek word for hospitality is *philoxenos*, which means "lover of stranger"; and we are called to be these lovers. Pouring out the silverware on the kitchen table may not seem like much but it is a small way to pour out our blood for the love of a stranger. Dying a little bit to our own comfort allows the guest to feel included.

An equally important component of hospitality is that the host knows what it is like to be the guest. When we allow someone to offer us hospitality we learn what it feels like to not have control, to be the one in need. It allows the other person an opportunity to shine, to give and to be needed. In our desire to "not be any trouble" we forget that perhaps the host needs to be needed and we lose sight of the fact that we need to be the Christ guest at times.

Finally and perhaps most essentially the person of hospitality makes a place safe for the stranger by becoming vulnerable. This vulnerability means the host or hostess is willing to share dreams, frustrations, ideas and the movements of God in a way that frees the guest to do the same.

*The person of hospitality
makes a place safe for the
stranger by becoming
vulnerable.*

Who Seeks our Hospitality?

We may think of ourselves as basically hospitable people but sometimes when guests scratch the surface of our thin skin we bleed. We realize that we don't feel very welcoming and our arms are folded across our chest in a gesture that signals that we are anything but open. We look at these guests and our body language tells them that we would like for them to pick up their bags and leave.

The guest might be the brand new stranger, the one we have never brushed shoulders with before. This is one that we fear because our arms have never reached far enough to encompass the AIDS victim or street person, the addict or homosexual before. Sometimes we avoid strangers because our bonds of self-righteousness don't allow us to offer a hand to the prostitute, the prisoner, the abortionist or racist. And sometimes we bind the hands of others that would wish to offer a place of safety because like the closed-minded leaders of the Jewish community during Christ's life we don't want anyone getting out of line.

Today, as in the time of Jesus, the hospitable people still run the risk of persecution by members of their own faith-communities. Some years ago our community had a convent located in a town that also had a large prison. The sisters lived in a large house and had several extra bedrooms so they decided to offer hospitality to the families of prisoners.

They gave family members a place to stay at night if their trip had been a long one. Some parishioners rebuffed the sisters for offering this hospitality. Many in the parish consciously chose to ignore the prison population when it came to offering service. They didn't want the sisters to offer hearth or heart either. Eventually the sisters had to move on and shake the dust from their feet for they found no support for their ministry of hospitality.

In our communities these brand new strangers might be candidates or novices who step into our lives bringing creative ideas and fresh energy. Perhaps they question our rules, specifically the unspoken rules, the rules that we use to control one another. How difficult is it to make room for this new life if we've settled into a way of being that is comfortable for us?

Within our communities and families may be the most difficult place to offer hospitality for here we also encounter the familiar strangers. These are people that we have known all of our lives, people that we've known in community for years, the people who live in the same house without communicating. They live in a house but there is no one home.

Narrowing down the scope of stranger even further we find that sometimes the stranger that is most in need of our hospitality is the stranger within. We cannot offer real hospitality of the heart until we are at home within ourselves. This may mean accepting a gifted side that we have never explored during the first half of our life, or the

*We cannot offer real
hospitality of the
heart until we are at
home within
ourselves.*

scarred child within that we never have had the courage to embrace before, or the prophet within which longs to speak out but who fears condemnation. Welcoming the stranger within will always help us to open our arms out to the rest of the world.

The Call to Arms in the Blood of Jesus

In a world gone mad with the desire to protect, to isolate and to alienate, our call is clearly a radical departure from closed-door policies. The atmosphere in our world today is toxic territory for the pilgrim seeking the warmth of home away from home. Into this breach we stretch out our arms to pull into our midst the stranger in need of a safe space.

The word hospitality can seem rather innocuous, but for the host or hostess signed in the blood of Jesus it is a call that tears us from our comfort zones and lifts us up on the cross of availability. Precious Blood hospitality becomes a sacrificial expression when we are willing to be with those whom the rest of the world has ignored. It is about settling into a situation in such a way that even the most isolated member of the community will eventually find courage to respond.

Our Precious Blood arms need to be wrapped around the lepers in our lives. Our hearts need to be attuned to the needs of our guests, to the subtle nuances that let us know when we need to move from being to doing or from acting to prayerful presence. Offering welcome and

*Our Precious Blood arms need to be wrapped
around the lepers in our lives.*

safety to our dear neighbor needs to become as natural as breathing. In the presence of the Christ guest our own desires at times must wait and our time becomes time we freely give away.

Welcoming the brand new stranger, the familiar stranger or the stranger within breaks down the walls of the isolationist. With arms outstretched to receive the new life, the new idea, the new viewpoint it is impossible to hold on to the armor of the protectionist.

Finally, Precious Blood people understand the attitude of the sister who proclaimed with a strong and joyful voice, "Welcome, Welcome" as she received the Eucharist. We understand it because we live it, we breathe it and because our souls overflow with the joy of it. In the Eucharist we open our hearts wide so Jesus will find a place in our hearts. In this meal of remembrance we meet again the guest that gifts

us with Presence and Love and in the transforming power of the Blood we are the ones that come home.



For Reflection

What is the most difficult aspect of offering hospitality for me?

Which of my own experiences of hospitality have touched me deeply. Why?

Who is the “familiar stranger” in my community or home or church to whom I could offer hospitality?

What unwritten rules in our homes prevent the Christ-guest from feeling truly welcome?



*Adorer of the Blood of Christ **Anastasia Rubenacker** is the director of hospitality at the Ruma Regional Center. Anastasia has always been actively involved in the ministry of hospitality especially through her involvement in the Adorers’ ministry to refugees from Cuba and Guatemala, and her work in prison ministry and with unwed mothers. She is a spiritual companion, wisdom figure, and gracious hostess to all who pass her way.*

***Janis Yaekel** is an Adorer of the Blood of Christ who serves as director of the Center of Peace located at the Ruma Regional Center. She is involved in retreat and spiritual companionship ministry. Janis is also very involved in finding ways for the human population to experience reconciliation with creation and welcoming the relationships that nature offers.*



Precious Blood, Precious Life

By Fran Raia, CPPS

Every day the war with Iraq comes home to us through television, newspapers, radio, and magazines. The faces and sounds of suffering people haunt us. Much blood, much precious blood is being shed: Iraqi women, children, soldiers, as well as women and men of the United States and the United Kingdom. It is difficult to be a sister of the Most Precious Blood with this senseless spilling of blood, wanting to stop the madness yet not knowing how to begin to heal this gaping wound.

We are all one blood with the people of Iraq, Palestine, Israel, Afghanistan, with the people who fear us and hate us. We are one blood with the US and UK women and men who fearfully serve in Iraq and really just want to go home.

The foundress of the O'Fallon community, Mother Theresa Weber, said "all life is precious, precious as the blood of Christ." She said this during a difficult time in Switzerland when some young women were looking to the saving blood of Christ for healing and strength.

In thinking about my spirituality as a precious blood sister, I have been reflecting on Mother Theresa's words: precious blood, precious life. Sisters of the Most Precious Blood is a puzzling title especially for people outside of Catholic circles. How do I explain what our title means and how my life is intimately connected to the blood of Christ?

"Heard unto Speech"

For many years in community I can't say I really thought much about precious blood. I was too busy learning how to be an effective teacher, how to live in community and find time for personal prayer and reflection. It was in the celebration of the Eucharist, we were taught, that we participated in the redemptive act of Jesus who gave his life, his blood for us. Our focus in formation was

how to participate fully in this paschal mystery through our singing, attention to detail, and creating a celebration that was a work of art. Sometimes it was enough to float along the waves of song and Latin that was beautiful in its strangeness. At other times, like singing practice, it seemed more like shedding blood, sweat and tears to

produce a perfect sound.

I became aware of my own need to find meaning, to find myself, as a woman, included in the Mass.

In the years I taught small children, I was driven by a desire to make the Eucharistic celebration meaningful to 7, 8, and 9 year olds. Many teachers can relate to the patience and creativity it takes to engage young children and include them in an adult activity. As I attempted to do this I became aware

of my own need to find meaning, to find myself, as a woman, included in the Mass.

The children, the teachers, the mothers, my sisters in community taught me what was relevant and not relevant about the Eucharist. Working with the children taught me to state things simply, to peel away unnecessary and pompous explanations and stand in awe of the heart of the matter. Accompanying women as we shared experiences and validated them for each other opened up a new world for me. I witnessed and continue to witness women being, in Nelle Morton's words, "heard unto speech."

When women speak we say that our experiences, our faith, our reality be taken seriously, that we are not the labels we have inherited through our histories and our traditions. That we need to read Genesis 1:27 with new eyes and believe we are created in the image of God and we carry that image within us as a precious legacy. (1)

This precious legacy is carried in our bodies as well as our minds and souls. My spirituality as a precious blood sister cannot be separated from my body as a woman. "Do our bodies affect the way we experience and integrate religion, theology, and spirituality? Yes, our bodies have everything to do with our interpretation of religion and religious experience." (2)

Women's Spirituality

That is a very different perception from the view of Thomas Aquinas who said that woman is a "defective male, a misbegotten male; a daughter is the result of something gone wrong." (3) Augustine, Tertullian and many others have said similar

things about women and these still influence how women are viewed in society as well as in the church.

Magazines, TV, movies, music, radio tell women how we are to look, smell, act, walk, talk, and what we are to wear. Our bodies are compared, criticized, judged, and objectified. Glance at the ads in any magazine (except *MS* magazine) for examples of how we are supposed to look. Any natural functions of our bodies, menstruation, menopause, are ridiculed, minimized, disregarded, and stereotyped. Women during menstruation are “on the rag,” “having the curse,” PMS rage, and many more!

Rarely in groups of women have individuals answered affirmatively when I asked: “What do you like about your body?” Most women quickly share what they dislike: my nose is too big; my breasts are too small, too large; I have “thunder thighs”; I’m too tall; too short; too different! Many may share the feelings of Pam Houston when she wrote: “Sometimes I’m afraid the main reason I spend half of my life outdoors is simply because there aren’t any mirrors.” (4)

This is the legacy of a patriarchal society that says men are to be valued for their minds, their decisiveness, and their strength; while women are to nurture, raise the children and listen to men. We continue to live a double standard. Women are identified with their bodies; men are identified by their spiritual qualities, including courage, strength and intelligence. It is only recently that many women have even considered that they are spiritual beings and have a spirituality. They understand religion and religious practices, but embracing their own spirit is foreign to them.

Most of the women in a course I taught on women’s spirituality would say they were taking the course because they didn’t have a spirituality, were not religious. What a gift to journey with these women as they discovered their spirit and the holy within them.

Jesus is someone who knew that women are sacred in their whole person, body, blood, spirit and mind. There are so many stories of Jesus breaking laws to reach out to women or to allow them to reach out to him. The woman ripped away from her partner in the “very act of adultery,” when Jesus points out the injustice, the double standard, and challenges the men. The woman at the well who suffered isolation, racism, sexism, talks with Jesus who affirms her honesty and her spirituality and reveals to her the depths of his mission.

Precious blood, precious life. The woman with the hemorrhage, a blood disease, reaches out and touches Jesus. A woman who couldn’t be touched by her husband or her sons, suffering this isolation and judgment for twelve years! Without his knowledge, power goes out from Jesus when she touches him, a jolt of divine energy and healing

called forth by a woman!

Jesus says, "My daughter, your faith has restored you to health; go in peace and be free." How many times I have read that passage and loved the man who says her faith has restored her. I believe in this encounter Jesus is telling us that our bodies and all their functions, blood included, are so precious that He gives His life, His blood for us.

As a woman of the precious blood, my body has been made sacred by God's hands and by the love of Jesus who risked and then gave His life for me.

*As a woman of the
precious blood, my
body has been made
sacred by God's
hands and by the
love of Jesus who
risked and then gave
His life for me.*

As a woman of the precious blood, I meet the body and blood of Christ as I listen to the struggles and sufferings of others.

As a woman of the precious blood, I stand with others against this war and the shedding of innocent blood.

As a woman of the precious blood, I celebrate Eucharist with students who are broken, afraid, depressed, grieving and with those who are free of these mental tortures.

As a woman of the precious blood, I want to live Joan Chittister's challenge to be "open to the world, where no one is a stranger, or an outcast...where no ethnic jokes or racial slurs are uttered..." (5) And where no one is a second class citizen because of gender, race, class, culture.

As a woman of the precious blood, my heart beats with the blood of my sisters and brothers everywhere; with the women beaten by their family members, raped and killed by spouses, jailed for defending themselves; with those dying in war.

As a woman of the precious blood, I join my sisters in community, join my sisters and brothers in the church, join my sisters and brothers in the world who affirm the precious life and blood of each person. Only together can we be the hope our world needs.

NOTES

1. Winter, Miriam Therese. "Feminist Women's Spirituality: Breaking New Ground in the Church." The Church Women Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue. Edited by Elizabeth A. Johnson. Herder & Herder, 2002.
2. Kanis, Sharon. "Theobiology and Gendered Spirituality". American Behavioral Scientist. August 2002, Vol. 45, #12.
3. Johnson, Elizabeth A. "Imaging God, Embodying Christ." The Church Women Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue.
4. Houston, Pam. "out of habit, I start apologizing". Minding

- the Body. Edited by Patricia Foster. Anchor books, 1994.
5. Chittister, Joan. "Mission and Ministry in the Third Millennium." Second Intercongregational Precious Blood Congress. St. Louis, August 2-5, 1993.

RESOURCES

- ◆ Chittister, Joan. Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men. Novalis, 1998.
- ◆ Furlong, Monika, ed. Women Pray: voices through the ages from many faiths, cultures, and traditions.
- ◆ Gateley, Edwina. A Warm Moist Salty God. Source Books, 1993.
- ◆ Morton, Nelle. The Journey is Home. Beacon Press, 1985.
- ◆ MS magazines especially: Spring, 2003, Vol XIII.
- ◆ Norris, Kathleen. Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith. Berkely, 1998.
- ◆ Rothenberg, Paula S. White Privilege: essential readings on the other side of racism. Worth, 2002.
- ◆ Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. The Woman's Bible. Northeastern University Press, 1993. (First published in 1895)



For Reflection

How do movies, magazines, ads, TV, make you feel about your body?

Does this contrast with what Jesus would say to you about your body?

Do you agree/disagree with the statement: "...our bodies affect the way we experience and integrate religion, theology, and spirituality?" Why or why not?

What are the implications of the above questions for your spirituality?



Fran Raia is a sister of the Most Precious Blood of O'Fallon, MO. She is currently campus minister at Maryville University in St. Louis and finds teaching courses on women's spirituality and sacred writings life-giving and a privilege.



A Mother's Love: Looking through a Microscope

**By
Jean Giesige**

Well, we have come full circle. When I first went to work as a reporter for our local daily newspaper, back in 1980, I was assigned to write a lot of stories that made the news because for the first time a woman had been hired for a particular job. You remember those. First woman firefighter (and we all had to get used to calling them firefighters, instead of firemen), first woman principal, first woman cardiologist. I even wrote a story about the first woman liquor-store manager (remember, we live in a small town where real news is sometimes scarce).

Gradually, there came a time when it was impolitic to notice a professional person's gender. All courtesy titles were dropped, and instead of trying to ask delicate questions about whether we should call an interview subject Miss or Mrs., everybody became Smith or Jones. We were all just workers in the capitalist vineyard, and the more progressive one was, the more strenuously one tried not to note the difference between a man and a woman.

Gradually again, things have shifted, and we have reached a point in our culture where we are once again noticing and talking about the differences. Therefore, it is okay to examine the premise that a woman's outlook and experiences might differ from that of a man.

A Fierce Mother Love

It is a relief to be able to acknowledge these differences, because certainly they exist. To make a gross generalization, I would say that men are telescopes, and women are microscopes. Men look out and see the whole wide world (this may explain the inexplicable

popularity of CNN). Women look in and see a universe of details in their own sphere (this may explain the inexplicable popularity of gymnastics classes for three-year-olds).

Through that microscope we women examine our own world and try to puzzle out our place in it. In my own situation, as a mother of four, I have been told so many times that motherhood is a vocation that I have finally begun to see it as such. This required more of a leap than one might think. Motherhood is so primeval, so fraught with unbreakable bonds and uncharted attachment that to say you love your kids is like saying you love oxygen: you couldn't live without either one. The word love doesn't begin to cover it.

God placed what Sr. Joyce Lehman called "the fierce mother love" (and fierce is exactly the right word) within us. Someone has to nurture and protect the babies of every species, and with our keen eye for detail

Motherhood is so primeval, so fraught with unbreakable bonds and uncharted attachment that to say you love your kids is like saying you love oxygen: you couldn't live without either one.

and our ability to find jeans on sale at the Gap, women are perfectly suited for it.

Where the plan goes wrong, I believe, is when that love, so fierce, also becomes exclusive. This can creep into a home in many ways, and is an insidious danger to the Christian family. Last winter I was at our daughter's indoor soccer match when the talk turned to Christmas. The woman behind me said that she decorated seven trees in her house for the holiday. I listened in spellbound wonder. Seven trees! One was a teddy-bear tree, one was filled with sports ornaments, one with the kids' pictures, and so on. The kids loved it. Of course they loved it. Kids have no sense of proportion. But women should. We should ask if, in a house with seven Christmas trees, there is any room for the newborn Christ.

In accordance with the dictates of our culture, we live lives that are full to the brim. We obsess over our material needs, and scheme over how to fill them. We decorate our homes, and then every few years we redecorate them. We put up privacy fences that define our space, a space that is meant exclusively for us and the chosen few whom we invite. The windows of our home, forever closed and usually covered as well, look inward, and so do we.

Left to its own devices this mother love, so fierce and so exclusive, builds an impenetrable and inappropriate wall around family life. It also

leads to a competition among parents to produce the perfect family, or the appearance of one. (There is no one more competitive than the mother of an upwardly mobile middle-class family. If you don't believe me, pay a visit to any sixth-grade science fair. Do you really think that any 11-year-old conducted those experiments in hydroponic vegetables or the tensile strength of a suspension bridge? Behind many a successful student in our schools is a bleary-eyed mother.)

This is one of the real dangers that mothers must guard against, this insular love that helps convince our children that they are somehow entitled to their privileged place in the world. It runs completely counter to the Christian message of acceptance and inclusion, of the missionary spirit of going out into a world, of being in the world and in service to the world's people, but not of the world.

Family and Precious Blood Spirituality

For me, the spirituality of the Precious Blood can be a powerful antidote to the poison of all that is insular. I used to think that I subscribed to a theology of geography, that I had affiliated myself with the Missionaries of the Precious Blood because they were close by, and that any other charism would have been as appealing had it been near. This was particularly true since it took me a long time to see the connection between Precious Blood spirituality and my vocation of family life.

Now I see that with its emphasis on service to those on the margin of our society, the spirituality of the Precious Blood can bring a new outlook to any family. The spirituality of the Precious Blood forces us to look ever outward, our eyes drawn to the periphery of our own vision, and beyond. It cannot be other than God's plan that we love and protect our children. But likewise it cannot be God's plan that we love and protect only our children.

The spirituality of the Precious Blood challenges us to redefine who is family to us. At our house, as we became more and more a part of the Precious Blood community, community members and other

Companions became more and more a part of us. And their wonderful example of ministry and outreach in all its forms has inspired and encouraged us to increase our boundaries of care and concern, and to teach our children to do the same. The walls of a home, as it turns out, are permeable.

*The spirituality of the
Precious Blood
challenges us to redefine
who is family to us.*

So one is called, even in root-bound family life, to grow outward. I was discussing this topic with Fr. Larry Hemmelgarn, CPPS. I told him about my premise that mothers have a tendency, which they must fight, to become insular and overly protective. “But just by virtue of your being a mother,” he said, “you become a mother to all. If you are the mother of a 12-year-old, then all 12-year-olds see you in the role of a mother.”

Mother to all 12-year-olds. It’s a frightening thought. But if one works at it, one can grow into the role. Recently, after I dropped our oldest son off at his middle school, I found myself having a maternal thought toward a high school student, walking toward his school in a stiff winter wind with his jacket unbuttoned. When our children were infants I could never have had such a thought about a 16-year-old, as 16-year-olds routinely tried to run us over in the parking lot of the grocery store as they raced back to school after their open lunch period. Because of all I have seen and experienced both as a Companion and as a mother, my heart has been stretched.

A World without Borders

This spirituality of the all-embracing, as Fr. Jeff Keyes, CPPS calls it (he finds even the word inclusive to be exclusive, as it still implies drawing a circle, even if it is a big one) can stretch a family, and it can stretch a church. Fr. Joe Miller, CPPS once said that he makes it a priority among his parish community to work for all who reside within the geographical boundaries of the parish, not just the Catholics. So that gets me to thinking, it’s not just enough to love our four kids, I really should work on loving everybody in the church. And

This is how Precious Blood spirituality has found its place in our life. It is the key, the window, the open road, the expanding horizon.

that’s not enough either, because I really should be showing love to everybody in town, and maybe even those out in the countryside too, and those in the next county, and so on and so on until I am showing concern for everybody in the whole wide world.

It’s exhausting, but nobody

ever said parenting was going to be easy.

So now we’re trying to live in a world without borders, where all children are our children and all the children of God are our immediate concern. This is how Precious Blood spirituality has found its place in our life. It is the key, the window, the open road, the expanding horizon.

It is the telescope and the microscope, the Alpha and the Omega in our alphabet soup.

As Jesuit Jean-Pierre de Caussade wrote, “Surrender of the heart to God includes every possible way of obedience to God, because it means giving up one’s very being to God’s good pleasure. Since this surrender is effected by unalloyed love, it includes in its embrace every kind of operation his good pleasure may bring to pass. Thus at every moment we practice a surrender that has no limits, a surrender that includes all possible methods and degrees of service to God. It is not our business to decide what the ultimate purpose of such submission may be, but our sole duty is to submit ourselves to all that God sends us and to stand ready to do his will at all times.”

To do his will at all times, and to open wide our windows so that we can see what that will might be. That is the call to all of us, men, women or children.



For Reflection

We all want our homes to be havens of peace in these troubled times. But how can we strike a balance between havens and hermitages, where we go to shut the world out?

What are some ways that we can teach out children, who have naturally clannish tendencies, to open their hearts and minds to those in need?

The Precious Blood charism includes a sense of hospitality. How do we nurture that hospitable attitude in our families, in our homes, in our churches?



Jean Giesige is a Precious Blood Companion who writes for the secular and religious press. She is the editor of several publications for the Cincinnati Province of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood. Jean and her husband, Mark, also a Companion, live in Celina, Ohio, with their four children, two cats, mismatched socks, a congenitally dirty minivan, and usually a half-finished jigsaw puzzle. It’s that kind of house. Anyone who wants to visit is welcome, but may want to call first.



On the Road to Emmaus: A Long Journey Home

By Frances Flanagan

Sometimes I think of my long, slow journey to precious blood spirituality as my road to Emmaus. My journey leads to the breaking of the bread, but it does not stop there. It is in the sharing of the cup that follows that I find a new awareness of the Risen Lord and a greater love for the precious blood.

Devotion to the precious blood has not come easily to me, and even in my early childhood my disposition and my experiences were against it. For one thing, I had a negative attitude toward blood. I did not want to see blood or even read about it; I did not understand the role of blood in my body, and I was happy in my ignorance. Clearly, I was a long way from being ready for precious blood spirituality.

My initiation into precious blood spirituality came in early childhood, through the crucifixes that hung on the walls of my relatives' homes and that I knew had once lain on the caskets of deceased family members. While I was still too young to be told about the agonies of the passion or to understand why Jesus was in the deplorable state that I saw him in on the cross, each crucifix became a memorial of someone I had known or wished I had known. To me, therefore, crucifixes became symbols of human death and loneliness long before I could relate to them as representatives of Jesus' love for us and of his magnificent gift of salvation. Even now, I agree with St. Teresa of Avila who wrote in *The Book of Her Life*: "Certainly there is no one who can endure thinking all the time about the many trials [Jesus] suffered." I find it impossible to emulate St. Gaspar del Bufalo, founder of the Society of the Precious Blood, who advised Luigia, his niece, to "have recourse incessantly to the fountains of Jesus which are his wounds."

At the time I made my First Communion we received only the host, so even that experience added next to nothing to my understanding of the precious blood. It was a happy occasion, but it was made so totally by the host, which I had been led to love and desire. Almost as if it

were an irrelevant carryover from the past, the precious blood was left in the shadows. Even the Latin mass had the unintended role of helping to produce its isolation.

Dark Night of the Precious Blood

Probably at about this time I was introduced to devotion to the Sacred Heart. In our culture, the heart as the foundation of love is an ever-present concept. We find it in our songs, literature, everyday conversation, and by our second or third Valentine's Day we've had this concept visibly and indelibly reinforced. As we grow into scripture and literature, it is more of the same. Quite naturally, I found devotion to the Sacred Heart appealing and delightful, and over the years the Sacred Heart remained my favorite conceptualization of our Lord.

Although we know it is difficult if not impossible to miss what we've never had, I've come to realize that the virtual absence of the precious blood from my life before Vatican II created a spiritual vacuum within me. I think of the long era beginning when the communion cup was withdrawn from the people and ending with its reinstatement by Vatican II as the Dark Night of the Precious Blood, and I symbolize it in my imagination with a moon that is never more than half full.

Actually, the thought of devotion to the precious blood had never entered my mind, nor was the term "precious blood" even a part of my

*I've come to realize that the virtual absence
of the precious blood from my life before Vatican II
created a spiritual vacuum within me.*

speaking vocabulary, when in 1991 I was invited to consider becoming a Precious Blood Companion. I began this process with all the confidence of a reluctant kindergartner. While I knew the joy of venerating the host at forty-hours devotions and of participating in magnificent pre-Vatican II Holy Thursday celebrations, the precious blood had provided me with no such opportunities. I even fretted that by "adopting" the Precious Blood I would be casting the Sacred Heart aside. Yet in a vague way I was sure that becoming a companion would lead to my spiritual growth. As time went on, I felt less unsure as a companion, but I was still struggling to feel at ease with the core of the program—with the precious blood, itself. Then Father Dien Truong, CPPS asked me to be minister of the cup at his first mass. I had never filled this role before.

I remember standing near the altar and receiving the host in my hand. In my imagination, the host became the Christ child. I loved him, and I cuddled him to protect him from the evils of the world. I consumed the host with great joy.

Then I was given the cup. For a few seconds, I held it tentatively. Then it, too, became alive for me—alive as it really was, alive with the living, loving blood of the risen Lord.

*I thirsted
for the cup,
but my
caution
overran my
love.*

Despite this happy experience, there was still a serious omission in my devotion to the precious blood. By this time, sharing in the cup had long been a part of most of our Eucharistic celebrations, but much of the time I was not participating. I had qualms, all of which I found quite reasonable: I might get a germ; I might give a germ; the process was too awkward; I was too awkward; sometimes wine made me cough.... I thirsted for the cup, but my caution overran my love. God is thorough, however, and he isn't content with things half-done.

One day at a Kansas City Province Assembly, I ate lunch with several other companions and Father Dien. The conversation turned to the sharing of the cup. It was apparent that at least some of us accepted the cup only rarely and hesitantly. Then Father Dien repeated to us what he recalled having said in a previous discussion on the Eucharist: "Whatever the problems and dangers of drinking from the cup may be, they do not equal the good that comes from it." My qualms flew out the window.

Precious Blood Love

How could I have failed to know that the blood in the cup is not as a still pool but living, compassionate, eager, loving—the precious blood of Jesus, our Risen Lord, who lives in his blood as his blood lives in him?

This is the precious blood that once blessed the streets of Jerusalem and lavished its holiness on the unknowing soil of Calvary; this is the blood that our Risen Lord bore with him in his ascent to his father's house as the price of his entry and ours. It is the blood that now, in this time, in this place, flows vigorously through his veins as it regulates the beating of his heart.

How could I not have grasped the reality of precious blood love? Now I know it is virile and feminine, strong, tender, passionate. Christ's love dances in the cup as his heart reaches out to us. Sometimes in my imagination the Risen Lord rises from the cup of his blood—sustained

and nurtured and invigorated by its power—not to go to his father’s house but to be more present to us—to be with us, his people.

Is there something we may catch from the precious blood? Yes! We may catch his eagerness to serve others; we may even catch his holiness.

When he comes to us during the Eucharist, the Precious Blood brings heaven with him. Only when we love can we grasp that gift at all; when we love enough, perhaps we can see more clearly; someday we will understand.

The Giving Cup

Sometimes we speak of the cup we receive in the Eucharist as the “Giving Cup.” The “Giving” has a double sense: we are given the cup with its blessings, and we pass those blessings on to others through our witness and our loving stewardship. This understanding, which is at the heart of precious blood spirituality, demands that we all become missionaries.

Our first missionary call comes in baptism when we are enjoined to be holy (no exceptions allowed). Through our holiness, which St. Gaspar says “is not anything else, but loving the Lord,” we become God’s ambassadors. Through our combined holiness and our good works we proclaim God’s majesty, goodness, and love. Through our smile, others see God smile, and in our voice they hear God whisper. To be holy is a great responsibility; to be able to become holy is a tremendous gift.

*Whatever our way of life
and whatever our
circumstances, we are
haunted by our
missionary role.*

Whatever our way of life and whatever our circumstances, we are haunted by our missionary role. In choosing to become a Precious Blood Companion, I agreed to be responsive to the calls initiated by the Society and with its help and largely in my own way as a lay woman, to participate in the missionary endeavors of the precious blood. I rely on the charism of St. Gaspar, who founded the Society in 1815, for my basic formation; I look to the members for formation, leadership and guidance; and as a companion, I try to discern and carry out the missionary role God chooses for me.

It was St. Gaspar’s belief that the work of saving souls (“God’s work”) could be performed best by priests and brothers whose foundation combined spirituality, learning, and community (love). With this background, he could envision not only that the Society’s mission

and retreats, given largely to other priests and seminarians, would bring about reform but also that the witness of the members' lives would become effective tools of conversion. It is my disposition, perhaps, that leads me to see Gaspar's plan, with suitable adaptations, as an effective base for my own growth in precious blood spirituality.

Gaspar's concern for saving souls was always accompanied by a strong humanitarian urge. He loved Rome's poor and worked to improve their lives. He was successful in securing reconciliation between brigands and the state. He was not afraid to speak out against injustices, even when he was imprisoned. His years with the Propagation of the Faith testify to his interest in the mission field. It is these humane concerns that provide a background for much of the modern apostolate of the society, and in turn, help to determine the spiritual paths of companions.

As a Companion, my first obligations are almost certain to be connected with the church and in any case are included in my covenant. Nevertheless, I still am obligated to participate in "the spirit of the Community," in "reconciliation, prayer, hospitality, and justice"; I join the community in concern for the poor, in ecumenical outreach, and in responding to the cry of the blood. It is in these and related areas that I feel most impelled by the precious blood.

Blood and Life

As someone who follows the precious blood, I must honor the blood and life of humankind. I deplore euthanasia; I deplore capital punishment; I also deplore what amounts to capital punishment in a land in which it is sanctioned by the government: the willful taking of the life of an unborn or partially-born (practically born) child.

I do not have to prod myself to work for the unborn; I cannot resist doing so. In saying this, I am reminded of an incident in my childhood. When I was seven, Mary, my two-year-old cousin, threw my rag doll, Helen Mary, ceiling-ward. In my mind's eye, I still have a vision of

As someone who follows the precious blood, I must honor the blood and life of humankind.

Helen Mary in ascent, of Mary as she looked upward, and of myself, horrified and stiff-limbed and with my mouth wide open. This, I suppose, was my motherly reaction to the abuse of my child. Now I extend that concern to the unborn children of God who are put to death in pain much greater than any I could have imagined for Helen Mary,

and I grieve with God whose sorrow, I feel sure, exceeds my own.

Perhaps another provision of my covenant is an appropriate ending for this article. It reads: "I will include Precious Blood spirituality in my spiritual reading and see where meditation on the blood of Christ leads me...." I think we can assume that it has already led me to write this reflection. In the future perhaps it will lead me into involvement with the apostolate of reconciliation that is just coming into the forefront of the Society's concerns.



For Reflection

What image (crucifix, cup, other) best speaks to you of precious blood spirituality? Why?

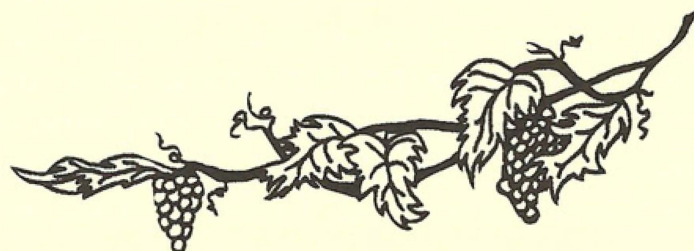
How have you arrived at the place you are today in your own precious blood spirituality?

What ministries do you feel drawn to by the precious blood?

In what ways, if any, do you think that your spirituality reflects your being male or female?



Frances Flanagan is a Precious Blood Companion (Kansas City Province). She has a B.A. in English from Mount St. Scholastica College—now Benedictine, and an M.A. in English and a Ph.D. in Higher Education from the University of Iowa. A retired educator, she formerly taught in the elementary schools in St. Joseph, Missouri, in St. Joseph Junior College, and in Missouri Western State College, where she also served as a department chairperson for six years. She is the author of two histories: Missouri Western State College (1915-1983) and St. Francis Xavier Parish, St. Joseph, Missouri, 1890-1990.



Listening for the Heartbeat: Nurturing Life in the Blood of Christ

By Deb Patyrak

On any given weekday, I can usually be found either substitute teaching or nursing at a multi-specialty clinic just down the road from my home. As a nurse, I “float” around the clinic, filling in for various nurses who are out sick or on vacation. And as a substitute teacher, I accept jobs from the second through the sixth grade at one of two nearby elementary schools. People ask me which I prefer, teaching or nursing, and I can’t honestly say. I used to say that teaching is my passion, but now I suspect that nursing is dividing that emotion. When I’ve been teaching for an extended period of time, I really miss the clinic. When I haven’t been able to teach for a while, I miss the students terribly. Mostly I think I’m just very, very fortunate to have two such options in my life.

I can say with no hesitation, however, what my favorite “substitute” job is. When I get really lucky, I work in one particular OB/GYN doctor’s office. He happens to be a friend of the family, but then so are all the rest of the OB doctors there. His is a predominately Medicaid practice, filled with young girls, virtually all of them unmarried, who are pregnant. I become a little challenged when some sixteen year old comes in, ready to deliver her third baby; then I struggle to keep my focus on the fact that this child and her child deserve the best of care and do not warrant judgment by me.

One day, I was checking in a new, first time mom, one who didn’t fit the normal profile of one of Joel’s patients. She was older (29), married, and a high school teacher. Her husband had accompanied her to the doctor’s office, but chose to wait in the lobby during the exam. After obtaining a very thorough history from her, I came to my favorite part, getting to listen to the heartbeat. I asked her if she thought her

husband might want to be there with her, at least that first time and she said yes, so I went to the waiting area and asked him to join us. He didn't look too excited when I called his name, sort of like "I really don't want to be present for any of this," but when I told him it was just to hear the heart beat for the first time, he stepped right in.

I explained what I was going to do, and then applied a special gel to her belly. The first time I put down the transducer, an instrument that transmits the baby's heart beat, I didn't pick up any heart beat. When I repositioned it, I got the mother's heart beat loud and clear. The parents looked at me expectantly, but I explained that the mother's heartbeat is a lot slower than a baby's and we'd need to keep trying. Ah, but the third time, out came a booming, galloping heartbeat from the transducer. The mother jumped so high, I honestly worried that she might fall off the table! The two of them were beaming from ear to ear and I couldn't help but think of what a blessing it was to be a part of this very special moment in their lives together.

A baby's heartbeat is rapid (anywhere from 120 to 160 beats per minute is normal) because the blood volume is so low. The heart needs to beat that fast in order to get oxygen to the tissues as they continue to grow towards birth. Every drop is, indeed, very precious. The mother's blood "feeds" the baby through the umbilical cord where oxygen and nutrients are exchanged, but her blood doesn't actually mix with the baby's. Each of us was nurtured by this same process as we grew towards our eventual birth—we all have this same blood connection as a foundation for our understanding of the importance of blood, and of being nurtured, in our lives.

Each of us was nurtured by this same process as we grew towards our eventual birth—we all have this same blood connection as a foundation for our understanding of the importance of blood, and of being nurtured, in our lives.

The Cycle of Life

Precious Blood spirituality is all about compassion, hope, and hospitality, common traits for most women. From my own perspective, women have a roller coaster of experiences of blood cycles. We begin with this blood connection with our mother, we eventually have monthly cycles that allow us to become mothers, and then we stop having monthly cycles which evolves into yet another

cycle of our lives. Literally all of it cycles back to that original nourishment received while growing in our mother's uterus.

Certainly my connection with my own children forces me to continue to nourish them emotionally and spiritually, if not physically. My husband and I have been empty-nesters for about three months now. Someone asked me if it had been a difficult transition and I answered without even thinking, "Oh, yes, you can't imagine how much I miss cooking for a family."

No one ever told me that parenting is more difficult when they leave home; at least it is for me right now. When one calls home sick, I want to be there, tending to him or her. Ever try diagnosing computer or car problems over the phone, especially when you're not particularly knowledgeable in either subject? My latest challenge has been a nineteen-year-old with a history of depression calling in the middle of the night to talk because he can't sleep. Sleep deprivation, combined with worry about your child's emotional health, is not a healthy state out of which to operate. But as we are taught about unfailing love, so must my commitment to my children continue.

It's not easy, but that same connection helps me allow my children to make mistakes. Even when practicing tough love, I remind myself that the noun in that phrase is 'love.'

Even when practicing tough love, I remind myself that the noun in that phrase is 'love.'

And always, I offer them a safe haven from the real and imagined perils of every day life. Just as God protected them in my womb, I continue to protect them by hopefully modeling healthy and Christian-based choices. I offer my children hope when they have just broken up with their latest love or when they are struggling with some academic subject. I offer hospitality to them and their friends, even when they may be dating someone I truly don't approve of. I know my husband and I have modeled a healthy marriage to them—and that each of them would want to have the same sort of love and respect in their marriages. Thus far, this has paid off because no relationship that we have disapproved of has lasted for any significant length of time. Always, I reach out a hand and offer them my support.

The Role of Caregiver

When I was growing up, most moms were stay-at-home moms; women who were generally the caregivers in terms of seeing that the family was fed, the house was kept clean, and in general, the peacekeeper. While times have certainly changed now and

far more women work outside the home, I think the concept of mom being the caregiver still forms the basic foundation of many families. There are far more female nurses and teachers and nurses, basic nurturing professions. It is still more common to have women doing the teaching in our religious education classes—but it's certainly not because they have more time on their hands than the men in our parishes. Women just seem more likely to tend to emotional needs whereas men focus on physical needs.

One big spiritual challenge for me has been that if I am typically the nurturer, how do I resolve the spiritual lulls in my life? Who do I turn to when I need assistance, when I am feeling alone and lost? When I am always the organizer in any given group, how willing am I to let down my guard and admit that I am wandering and frightened? How do I balance a need for time to heal with a mentality (and reality) that says I have to keep on moving? Sometimes about the best I can do is just simply put one foot in front of the other, trusting that God is supporting me and guiding me, even though I don't actually acknowledge it at the time.

In some ways, the basic cycles of life remind me that I will always return to the unwavering love of a parent, one who gave his very blood for me. When self-doubt and insecurities consume my energy, I know there is always someone to lift and encourage me, as my family knows that I will always lift and encourage them.

There are far more female nurses and teachers and nurses, basic nurturing professions.

Because all of us living today each shared the same nurturing in utero by our mother, all men and women have a common ground in our potential passion for the spirituality of the blood of Christ. What we choose to do with the spiritual highs and lows that come our way is what makes us unique individuals in the body of Christ. Our church is decidedly paternalistic in hierarchy, but it would not exist without maternity. We share an ability and responsibility, grounded in the blood of Christ, to coexist together in fulfilling our mission of spreading the good news of our salvation.



For Reflection

How do the different approaches to Precious Blood spirituality, in particular male and female, coexist together to further the mission of compassion, hope, hospitality, and reconciliation?

The fact that a mother's blood does not actually mix with the baby growing within her is significant. How difficult is it for me to remember that I cannot control the lives I touch, but rather support them while they make their own choices?

Spiritual highs are a dime a dozen. In the midst of one, how do you invest your newfound wealth? And more importantly, how do you reconcile your spiritual lows?



Deb Patyrak is currently a registered nurse/substitute teacher whose main ministry involves writing. She first started writing for The New Wine Press, in 1993. She has been married to her pediatrician husband for 27 years and has three children, ages 23, 21, and 19, all of whom have flown the coop. She now has 'cycled' back to the time when it was just her and her husband at home, and she has decided there is definitely life after children.

