

An Anthology of Precious Blood Spirituality



THE **WINE**
CELLAR

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Covenant

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

St. Gaspar del Bufalo

THE
WINE
CELLAR

An Anthology of Precious Blood Spirituality

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God Shows No Partiality

Once Carl Sandburg was asked what was the ugliest word in the English language. He thought for a moment and then said, “Exclusive.”

Precious Blood spirituality is inclusive: we are to be inclusive communities of memory and hope. One of the primary stories in Scripture that reflects the struggle of becoming an inclusive community is the story of Cornelius recounted in Acts 10. The conversion of Cornelius signalled the beginning of a new era. Cornelius was a centurion, “a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God.” One day, while he is praying, Cornelius receives a vision. He is told to send some of his household to Joppa and bring back the one known as Simon Peter. Cornelius instructs two of his servants to go to Peter who is staying with “Simon the tanner,” who by profession was considered an outcast. Peter is staying in a place where Jesus would have stayed: at the home of an outcast.

Peter is praying on the roof of Simon the Tanner’s house. But evidently his stomach is growling which distracts him in his prayer. In his hunger pangs, he receives a vision of something like a picnic blanket descending from heaven that is filled with all kinds of non-kosher food that Peter because of his religious beliefs is not permitted to eat. The voice of God tells Peter to eat the food. “No,” Peter replies, “for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” To which the voice replies, “What God has cleansed, you must not call common.”

The Scripture says that Peter is “inwardly perplexed as to what the vision which he had seen might mean.” But he doesn’t have time to consider it because the servants sent by Cornelius are downstairs

waiting to take him with them. Again, a voice tells Peter to go even though he doesn't have a clue as to what all this means.

When Peter arrives, Cornelius has gathered a few friends. Peter says to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone common or unclean." This is a major breakthrough in Peter's thinking. He moves from the precepts of the law to the priority of the person, focusing his attention on Cornelius and the people who have gathered in his home.

Cornelius shares his vision with Peter as to why he sent for him. And then Peter says, "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality."

As a Church, as a people of faith, and more specifically as professed, companion, and associate members, ordained and lay, of the Congregations which claim the name of the Precious Blood, we are still trying to live out those prophetic words.

This issue of THE WINE CELLAR addresses how we might become more inclusive in our becoming communities of the New Covenant. Bob Schreiter reflects on the biblical image of covenant which is central to our understanding of Precious Blood spirituality. Emphasizing themes of commitment, connection, and community, Schreiter traces the biblical threads of covenant that will help us meet the challenges of our day in prophetic yet practical ways. Toni Longo offers a personal reflection on how the theology of covenant impacts her relationships, experience of community, and her ministry. Two leaders of Precious Blood Congregations, Barry Fischer and Andrée Fries, submit there is great hope in religious life today if we live as animators of our founders' dreams and continue to search "with new eyes" for meaning and purpose in these times of great transition. And Jerry Stack looks at covenant from the perspective of the periphery, the margins, where more often than not hope is born.

As we seek to expand the boundaries of our understanding of what it means to be people of the New Covenant and deepen our commitment to the call of the Blood, may these reflections on covenant kindle memory and inspire hope.



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Covenant: Making Connections

By Robert J. Schreiter, CPPS

No biblical symbol is more central to Precious Blood spirituality than the covenant. That special relationship between God and God's people – sealed first in the blood of lambs and bulls, and later with Christ's own blood – runs like a red thread throughout the entire Bible. The blood of the cross takes its meaning from covenant, for the blood of the cross is the means by which God reconciles the world (Col 1, 20), bring those near who once were far off (Eph 2, 13). The eucharistic cup is a new covenant in Christ's blood (Luke 22, 20) that prefigures the eucharistic banquet in heaven. All of the biblical symbols associated with Precious Blood spirituality – cross, cup, the lamb – go back to that fundamental symbol, the covenant.

This article explores two aspects of a Precious Blood spirituality of the covenant. It begins by recalling the meaning of the covenant and the place blood plays in the covenant. Understanding this is basic to Precious Blood spirituality. In the second part, I will try to imagine what a Precious Blood spirituality of the covenant would look like today: what it calls us to and where it leads us. In doing so I hope to advance our appreciation of this fundamental biblical symbol and what it means for our spirituality.

The Meaning of Covenant

Covenant is one of the richest of the biblical symbols, and can be viewed from a number of angles. Seen from one side, covenant is about how God touches the world. That touch is a call into intimacy with God, an intimacy that transforms those who are called. In the covenant with Noah and his sons (Gen 9), God draws near to the bedraggled survivors of the flood and promises them a new life. Abraham is called out of his own country and is promised that he will be a blessing on the earth, and will himself be blessed with many descendants (Gen 12). But perhaps the most dramatic transformation is that of the Hebrew slaves in the Sinai desert, who through a covenant become God's special people (Exodus 24). In all of these instances, those who come into covenant with God experience a number of things. They are given new identities by God's coming close to them. And with that new identity, that new relationship with God, they receive a new destiny as well. As God's special people, Israel receives not only a privileged relation but special responsibilities: their lives together must mirror the compassion, the justice, and the mercy of God. Noah and his sons are reminded that they have been made in God's own image, which gives them a special place in the midst of all God has created.

Seen from another angle, covenant is much, much more than a contract or agreement. It does more than define a relationship. Covenant is about belonging to God, a kind of belonging that opens up our deepest capacities for being human, for being in the image and likeness of God. Those capacities for being human – our ability to trust, to love, to struggle for justice, to show compassion and care – are opened up by the call into covenant by God. It is that call to become part of something (and someone) so much greater than ourselves, to come to understand what it means truly to belong. It is that belonging to God that reaffirms our destiny, to become daughters and sons of God. That is why covenant is more than a contract or agreement entered into by two parties. Covenant cannot be seen as touching only part of our lives; it is utterly transformative of all we are. It is not an arrangement we move in and out of casually. It is a response to a call

from God to become who we were really meant to be.

Covenants do not simply define our past by reminding us of how God has worked in our history. Covenants carry with them a vision for the future. Like the rainbow that marked the sky in the story of Noah, covenants promise a different kind of future. They promise safety in an uncertain and dangerous world.

They promise, in the story of Abraham and Sarah, that they will live on in their descendants; they will not be forgotten. To the Hebrew slaves, the covenant promised a land of their own where they might live justly and freely. But perhaps more than any other covenant, the one of-

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fered us by Jesus in his own blood holds up the vision of the coming Reign of God, where there will be no hunger or thirst, and every tear will be wiped away. Covenants have a vision of what the world really looks like when God draws near. They provide not only a sense of belonging and of safety, but also a grand hope for a different kind of world. And that hope is very important, for it is hope that keeps us human under dehumanizing circumstances. One sees time and again throughout the world situations where people are weighed down by poverty, disaster, and war, yet somehow maintain their ability to love and care for others. It is hope for a different future that makes that possible.

The Blood of the Covenant

In the Bible, covenants are sealed by sacrifice, a special form of communication between God and humankind. typically an animal, who signifies the people entering into the covenant, is killed and offered to God. The killing represents the animal's moving from this world into God's world. Frequently the flesh of the animal would be eaten as a sign of communion with God. The blood, as the seat of the

gift of life -God's own spirit or breath – was not consumed. In Exodus 24, we read how it was sprinkled on the people to show their unity with God. At the last supper, Jesus offers a new covenant, sealed with his own blood, and invites us into communion with him.

The nature of sacrifice might offend our modern sensibilities, but we should not let that keep us from its deeper meaning. Sacrifice is about coming into communion with God, crossing the boundaries of the visible and the finite into the invisible and infinite world of God. The blood signifies the seriousness of this communication, and reminds us that communion with God touches the very life that courses through us. The blood also keeps before us all those situations in our world where life is not respected, crying out with the blood of Abel (Gen 4, 10). The blood of the covenant reminds us that God is the source of all life, and that we dare not spill the blood of God's children, our sisters and brothers.

Most profoundly, the blood of the covenant speaks to us about the life that comes to us because of the covenant, a life that brings us to the fullness of our humanity and erases all that diminishes us. It is a symbol of that bond between God and ourselves, a symbol of life and the abiding love that sustains it. It connects us in a special way to God.

A Covenant Spirituality

Covenant is the way the story of God's dealing with us is told in the Bible, from Noah and Abraham through Moses to Jesus. It is also intimately linked to the story of the blood. If covenant brings us into communion with God, makes us truly human in that communion, and holds forth a vision of hope, what would living out a covenant spirituality look like? And for a Precious Blood people, what might be the special contours of a covenant spirituality?

There are three aspects of covenant that speak especially to our times. Let me call them commitment, connections, and community.

As we noted above, covenant is more than a contract or agreement entered into by two parties. It is about a way of belonging that is best expressed by commitment. Commitment has to do with decisions and

choices that see beyond the immediate moment, especially when that immediate moment is unpleasant or unsettling in some way. By seeing beyond the immediate moment, we see something more fundamental and important than the discomfort we are now experiencing. Commitment is a way of saying that we are in this together. So a marriage commitment should not be surrendered at the first sign of conflict; nor do we abandon friends when they experience difficulties. A sense of belonging is fundamental to our well being. Without a sense of belonging we find it difficult to trust, and to care for those around us.

Commitment is not easy to come by in society today. It is probably always a difficult virtue to practice, but contemporary society has not made it any easier. The very temporary nature of just about everything not only makes commitment difficult; it also makes it look senseless. The increasingly temporary nature of employment means that work is uncertain. Loyalty to a company or to coworkers becomes slightly foolhardy, since one is likely to be disappointed at some point. Although the divorce rate is going down somewhat, an astonishing number of couples do break up, which makes marriage less than a long-term commitment. The mobility of people can make it more difficult to sustain friendships over long periods of time. A consumerist society bombards us with choices (although the choices are often not all that different), with the message that we must keep choosing new products, constantly remaking ourselves.

It is not surprising that in such a fast-paced, throw-away society that many young people in their twenties find themselves postponing life decisions as long as possible. They are no less capable of commitment than previous generations, but they are being presented with a world that is so uncertain that it becomes harder and harder to see the consequences of commitment and to trust the values of long-term commitment.

Covenant is about long-term commitment, through thick and thin. It is about a God who stays in the desert with former slaves for forty years, seeing something in them that they cannot see in themselves. It is about an aging couple, Abraham and Sarah, who can still dream about new possibilities. And it is about Jesus, who thought the New Covenant was worth dying for. A covenant spirituality promotes what

Pope John Paul II in Evangelium vitae called a “culture of life” against a “culture of death.” Accepting everything in life as merely short-term and therefore unworthy of commitment goes against a culture of life. By deeming everything short-term we end up living a life that says nothing (and no one) is all that important. We create an environment or culture in which little or nothing is taken seriously, an attitude that undermines trust, care, and finally human dignity itself.

The blood of Christ is a constant reminder that there are people and values worth dying for.

The blood of Christ is a constant reminder that there are people and values worth dying for. If we do not dare reach down into the depths of our beings to touch and care for those values, if we do not reach out in commitment to other people around us, we have broken the covenant and the blood of those

we would not touch will cry out.

Thinking about commitment and covenant takes us to a second dimension, connections. Connections are the bonds of belonging. To be connected is to be acknowledged and recognized, to be accorded our dignity as humans. The distinction is something made between an individual and a person. In contemporary society we are constantly urged to be individuals, to be our own woman or man. We are urged to construct ourselves with choice of lifestyles, consumer goods, and other accoutrements the marketplace has to offer. An individual is defined by what they *have*. Persons, on the other hand, are best defined by their *relationships*. That is why isolating anyone is such a dehumanizing experience. When, for example, people in families have conflicts and refuse to speak to one another, it is a diminishment all around: everyone loses.

A society that does not treat people as persons – related to God and to one another – ends up creating false connections. Persons are turned into objects. False connections – abuse, addiction, codependence – take the place of true, human connections. How we treat persons different from ourselves creates the false connections of discrimination

and racism, denying those who are different some of their humanity. There are people who sustain themselves on resentment and even hatred, but it does not make for much of a human life.

False connections and broken connection abound in our society, but a covenant spirituality strives to overcome them. The first mention of blood in the bible is about a broken connection: the death of Abel at the hands of his brother, Cain. The cross stands as a constant reminder of the broken character of so many of our relationships and the insidious false character of still others. But we have been bought at a great price (I Peter 1, 18). People who have become unconnected with others through age or accident, or who suffer under the burden of false connections should be our special concern.

A covenant spirituality is about making connections and sustaining them. Our ordinary language about blood is filled with images of relatedness, connection, and association. We speak of blood relatives, blood being thicker than water, blood lines. The Bible speaks of our being bonded to God in Christ's blood, blood that speaks more eloquently than the blood of Abel. It is the power of Christ's blood that gives us the assurances that our efforts to make connections are worthwhile, even when it seems the society we live in is sending a very different message.

Community, the third aspect of covenant, is conceived from the marriage of commitment and connection. "Community" is a frequently used word that has come to mean many things. Sometimes it refers to a group who share a common interest or characteristic, such as the gay community or the disabled community. Other times it refers to what Robert Bellah has called a "lifestyle enclave" where people of like mind or situation create a special living environment, such as some retirement communities where no children are allowed. Community understood in relation to covenant goes beyond these generalizations. It is marked by commitment that does not evaporate at the sign of the first difficulty. It is also marked by a sense of connection that can encompass difference and find a commonality in a shared humanity created in the image and likeness of a God who is one yet triune. And as a community of covenant, it holds up a vision of what a redeemed community can become, despite all its brokenness in the present. Community is not

easily achieved, and a covenant spirituality reminds us that for a community to succeed as a community it must be rooted in God's call to covenant.

Certainly the blood of the covenant, celebrated in the Eucharist is both a potent symbol of the community we share and the communion for which we hope. The cup of blessing which we share draws us deeper into that communion and recalls for us how much we depend upon God to create that community. Bonded together in that sign of God's great love for us, we dare to imagine community in situations that may now seem so distant from it.

Conclusion

Covenant is not only one of the richest symbols we have in the Bible of how God relates to us. It is also intimately connected to a spirituality of the blood of Christ, and may be seen as the very foundation of that spirituality. Important for us today is how much our society needs the message of covenant, with its emphasis on commitment, connection, and community. Living by the covenant brings us to a deeper understanding of what it means to be human, related to God and to one another.



For Reflection

In what areas of your life has commitment become more difficult? How might a covenant spirituality help you?

Name some of the broken and false connections in your family and in your parish. Are there persons who are cut off, or groups that are excluded? How might a covenant spirituality help make connections?

How well is your parish able to welcome people who are different? How might a covenant spirituality inspire you to be more welcoming?

Covenanting:

One Woman's Perspective

By Toni Longo, ASC

Covenanting is about relationships. It is about being with myself at my deepest level, being with others and the entire universe in profound and life-giving ways, and being with God in deepest intimacy and communion. Covenanting sparks a sensitivity, an alertness, an awareness of the comings of the “Beloved” in myself, others, in all creation, and God, and responding according to the longings and desires of my heart as affected by the “Other.”

This might be a bit jarring for those of us who have in mind the Hebrew Scriptures’ vision of covenant as an agreement between two parties, one “over” the other, one with “power”, the other with “need.” In my current understanding of covenant that cannot be the case. There is inequity and imbalance in such a view of covenant, certainly not the same as the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ. This new covenant is about mutuality, about being one with, about equality and co-responsibility for the outcome of the relationship. In the new covenant, there is a call to unity with the beloved, to a relationship in which those pledging Covenant are “no longer slaves, but free; no longer servants, but friends.”

I used to think of covenant as something God called me to, or gave me a share in. It was something I responded to, something “outside” myself; it “happened” to me through God’s grace. Now I know that for covenant to be real, I have to freely participate in the relationship. I can freely make a choice to be in covenant with my God; and that choice presupposes and demands that I be in covenant with my true self, with others, and with the whole cosmos in an honest and loving way. After all, “How can I love the God I cannot see if I do not love the God I see all around me?”

So, covenanting takes place in three moments: with myself, with other persons and all of creation, and ultimately with God. I’d like to explore these three moments in some depth to see what they have to say to us as Precious Blood people and our stance in the world today. I’ll ask these questions about each moment: How does this covenanting take shape? What face does it have in my life? To what does it call me?

Covenant with Self

When I reflect on the Covenant in my own life, I see that it shows itself in a willingness to be with myself, (both when it feels good to do so and when it doesn’t), and to get to know myself *as I really am*, not as I would like to be or as others would want me to be. Covenanting with myself takes shape as I acknowledge all that is within me (as much as I can know it at any particular time), my lights and shadows, the “beauty and the beast” within. It shows itself in a readiness to fathom and befriend the *More* deep down beneath the persona(s) I project to the world. Covenant with myself frees me to live in openness to being who I

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really am underneath all the masks, taking them off and letting them go because of the freedom that trust and acceptance give. Covenanting becomes real when I can be “at home” with myself, in true humility and peace.

This acceptance of myself takes time. I have been so programmed all my life to see myself as others would have me be, or I have played a role so long, either in community or ministry, that I no longer really know who I am separated from what I do. It takes time to work oneself away from the familiar, secure, and settled ways of seeing myself and look with fresh and new eyes, the eyes of God, who looks on all and says it is beautiful and good – NOT because of what I do, but simply because I am!

This movement into acceptance of myself also requires an ability to take risks, because once I begin the journey it will lead me to places into which I sometimes would rather not venture. If I am open to the grace surrounding me, I will become more and more acutely aware of anything that can lead me to truth, to reality, to integration within. All of the pretty pictures I have drawn of myself may disappear and I may find myself alone facing, maybe for the first time in my life, the question, “Will the REAL Toni please stand up?” Then my ability to be a faith-full person will be source of strength and courage. Being faithful means just that – being full of faith that God is present as I move into the unknown and would not invite me into a journey that would not ultimately lead me into wholeness and holiness, no matter how scary it may look at the outset. You might say that the “face” of covenanting with myself is “truth.”

Kin-dom: Covenanting with Others

Recently while watching the sunset from my balcony, I heard some talk below and looked down to see a young woman struggling to carry a television set and a young man carrying a clothes bag asking her where she was going. Shifting his bag he took the TV from her and carried it down the street to her door. I thought: “Typical Berkeley!” It was a beautiful experience of acceptance of diversity (two

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racess were involved), care for someone in need, and another's acceptance of help without fear of the differences between them.

This little story says a lot to me about covenant, and the way to live it. The story recounts a relationship, albeit a passing one, in a simple encounter that speaks

of the heart of God and the heart of humanity: giving without fear of rejection; receiving without fear of exploitation. Covenanting need not be grandiose. Covenanting is simple; it is simply living in an alert, responsive way.

Covenant takes form in a deepening awareness that I am deeply rooted and connected to all of creation. I am "a bit of stardust" connected to all that has been, all that is and all that will be. Much as the very breath of God flows through me. In my breath I am connected to those around me as I inhale the breath they exhale and they inhale the breath I exhale. (I became very aware of that during a recent prayer experience. Think about it the next time you are at community prayer, or riding a bus, or standing in line.)

I have recently been challenged to call the Kingdom of God the *Kin-dom* of God because, indeed, we are all connected, we are all equal members of the Kingdom, and we belong to each other. *We are kin*. There is no piece of creation that I am not a part of and which is not a part of me. We are all created in God's image and are called to a kinship with each other which is deep and profound. There is absolutely nothing and no one to whom I am not inter-connected and to who I am not in relationship.

The *Kin-dom* of God is among us! Jesus has come in history to show us how to live with one another. Together we await the second coming of Christ at the end of time. Notice we wait **together!** Not alone; not isolated. Together. As we become more and more aware of our inter-connectedness and the needs of each other and respond to them, we make the *Kin-dom* of God a reality here in this place, at this time.



Our lives are made of relationships. We are in relationship from the moment of our conception and remain so until the end of our earthly life and beyond. More and more I am convinced that the only way I can live covenant is in deep-down, gut-level relationship to the women and men around me, and not only my friends, not only the ones who think the same as I do and affirm everything I say and do. Covenant extends to ALL of the people of God – all of the people in the world. By my very life, and deepened by covenant relationship, I am connected to all of life. All of life is part of me. Covenant, then, shows its face in my care for all of creation and for the environment. It becomes real in my compassion for the earth, in my reverence for all that lives no matter how little, how obscure, how insignificant, because I know it is anything but.

A sunset in Berkeley is a “must see” experience: different each evening, each more beautiful than the previous night’s. Covenanting, too, is not static – it is an alive, active, dynamic and full of life reality. It is constant motion, constant growth and movement toward fullness. It must be, or it would cease to be. As the colors of a sunset seem never to come to an end and are a reminder of my call to creativity in my living of this gift of life, so the ways of living covenant are as many and varied as the bits of our lives.

I am intimately and irreversibly connected to all persons who inhabit this universe with me: my family of origin, my community, my Church, persons with HIV/AIDS, the homeless, the alienated, the

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isolated, the oppressed, persons of color, the poorest of the poor as well as the rich and the powerful, everyone. I am a bit of each of them and they a bit of me. There is a "blood relationship" among us that is impossible to erase which is both gift and challenge calling me forth beyond my wildest imaginings into even deeper ways of accepting, loving, giving and receiving. The operative question, then, seems to be: "How can I be creatively involved in the life of our planet and its creatures?"

Covenanting is more than hollow rhetoric, fancy prayers, and charitable contributions that salve my conscience. It's rolling up my sleeves and getting my hands dirty; it's putting my energies where my mouth is and being about the everyday, ordinary ways of loving. It's about moving from talk to real living of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. It's about inclusion and mutuality. It's about forgiveness and reconciliation. It's about putting my life on the line so that others may live. It's about making decisions about my consumption of the earth's resources that make a statement regarding my belief that ALL life is precious. It's about BEING love. My covenant face toward others is "love."

Covenant: Intimacy with God

Covenanting is a process. I grow in understanding of covenant as I live it. It grows and matures within me, giving form and beauty to my life. Even God's idea of covenant was in process; God changed God's way of relating to God's people. Listen to the prophet Jeremiah:

See, the days are coming – it is Yahweh who speaks – when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel, but not a covenant like the one I made with their ancestors on the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that Covenant of mine...No, this is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel when those days arrive - it is Yahweh who speaks. Deep within them I will plant my law, writing it on their hearts. Then I will be their God and they shall be my people. (Jer 31, 31-33)

God's desire was and is that I be in relationship with God. "I will be her God and she will be mine," is what God says to me. Not in a forced, abusive or coercive way, but with tender longing God will draw me to God's self.

Covenant is relationship with God. It is friendship, intimacy, love at the deepest level. God calls me to this relationship in unique, personal ways, speaking to me in the depths of my being, calling me to ever greater fullness, inviting me to intimacy as deeply rooted as blood is in my body, a true life-giving force. It is mine but to give myself to "being with God" in creative, loving and passionate ways, for indeed, God is passionately in love with me and God's dream for me finds resonance in my deepest dreams for myself.

If I allow myself to fall into God's embrace I leave myself open to *life in abundance*. The "if" is an important word. It demands risk and abandon. How much am I willing to let go, to risk, in order to empty a space within where I might receive? "I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full" is not an empty promise. It is the Word of God, a promise full of hope. The gifts of the new covenant are unconditional love and unlimited forgiveness.

The mutuality of the love is integral. God calls me friend and that requires a response from me. Friendship implies a willingness to be vulnerable, open, honest and straightforward. It implies a desire to give the relationship the time and attention it needs to grow through a reasonable daily rhythm that manifests balance and times for solitude. It demands a readiness to continue the journey together no matter how rough the going might be.

Being with God implies nakedness, freedom, and willingness to be “me” before God, to be seen as I am and to be content to be available for the “good pleasure of God, always.” Being with God means availability for “intercourse” in its most primal sense, to be literally penetrated to the depths of my being by this God who loves me more than I can imagine. It is to be ready to be God’s delight, and to give God delight in any way possible, as a woman gives delight to her beloved. It is to be together, to be one, to conceive and give birth to new life. The face of covenant with God, then, is “life.”

Covenant Is Life

Covenant lived is promise fulfilled. As I live covenant with myself, others, the cosmos and God, I become more alert to opportunities to give love and forgiveness, and I become more free to receive, knowing that others cry out for the opportunity to give. God’s own love becomes incarnate in me, shared with all, and received again from them. The cycle continues; the concentric circles spread out and all life is touched and renewed. Indeed, “what goes around, comes around.”

Before I end, I need to say something else. I know it isn’t easy to live a covenant life. Life is life. I’m not always the open, generous, forgiving person I want to say is me. Relationships break down; there are disappointments; I am let down by the ones I count on the most and wonder why I bother at all. As I do what I can do for the environment, I watch others use and abuse it. I work for peace and justice in my little corner of the world, yet war and bloodshed abound near and afar. And as much as I try, my time with God doesn’t seem to help me experience God’s nearness; in fact, God sometimes seems farther away.

Covenanting is difficult. Things aren’t always going to be perfect; in fact, they probably never will be because if they were, I wouldn’t need a redeemer, a friend, a lover to fill me with unconditional life and love. I wouldn’t need others in my life to teach me mellowness and compassion. I wouldn’t need to experience my own littleness and so yearn to be filled with the utter fullness of God.

So, when all is said and done, why would I want life to be any

different? Why would I want covenant to be easy? Covenant is a relationship that encompasses all relationships, a friendship that informs every friendship, a love that embodies what it literally means to love. Covenant gives life. Covenanting is life-stretching. Covenant IS life.

Covenant is a relationship that encompasses all relationships...

Now, back to the beginning. Covenant is a relationship in process at its deepest, most basic level. How I live it speaks volumes about me, but even more about the God who invites me to this intimate sharing of our beings. It speaks about a God whose only desire is that the *Kin-dom* be a reality, lived in each person. It speaks about a God whose entire being strains to give **life in abundance** who delights when I take part in the *dance* of love!



For Reflection

How do you view the difference between the concept of *covenanting* and what you understand by the word, *covenant*? What difference do you think this “process” attitude will make in enlivening your relationships with yourself, others, all creation and God?

Reflect on the significance of the breath of God in relation to the covenant and your inter-connectedness to all creation.

How does the image of the *Kin-dom* of God resonate within you? In what concrete ways can you live it more fully?

How do you live the **abundance** of God?

Renewing the Covenant

A Mission of Precious Blood Spirituality

The Missionaries of the Blood of Christ of the Pacific Province have developed a parish mission on the theme, “Renewing the Covenant.” Members and Companions of the Pacific Province including Gregory Comella, G. Margaret Downs, James Franck, Jeffrey Keyes, Maureen Lahiff, Gary Luiz, and James Sloan collaborated not only in the writing of this mission but in its presentation. Both Members and Companions share in the preaching during the four nights of the parish mission. We offer here the focus of each evening’s presentation.

Inclusion

By the shedding of his blood, Christ included each person in his kingdom. The Blood marks us as members of the household and so marked, we are entitled to citizenship, membership, inclusion in the family of God. Jesus accepted and included everyone. We need to listen to and accept the “call of the Blood” to inclusion, belonging, and incorporation into the life of Jesus still present in our world. We do this by imitation of Jesus, by being his presence in the world today, by accepting and including all people into our household of believers.

Reconciliation with Oneself

What happens in Reconciliation? Sins are forgiven, not cut off and separated from us. If we were capable of violence before we receive the sacrament of Penance, we are still capable afterward. The violence we have done to others and to ourselves does not vanish.

But we can accept healing. We must come to acceptance of ourselves as we are, and that will lead us to acceptance of others just as they are. In the saving Blood of Christ we are healed and made whole.

Reconciliation: Relationship with Others

The Blood of Jesus was shed for the reconciliation of the world. We need to be reconciled to others in our lives and to realize that we are all redeemed in the Blood of Christ. That doesn't mean that we are perfect, but it does mean that we have the opportunity to change ourselves and the way we relate to others by acceptance of our own humanity and the humanity of those around us. Those who feel themselves far off or separated from the family of God, can be reassured that they do indeed have a place in the kingdom because of the sacrifice of Jesus.

Covenant

We are invited to enter into a covenant with God, to live as witnesses to the power of the Blood of Christ. We believe that we are saved, healed, and reconciled by the Blood, and so we promise to witness to that belief by bringing the Good News to others, by living lives of witness, by being examples of reconciliation, healing, and inclusion.



The Test

Sweating palms
to gather the wood
to build the fire
to slaughter the son.
Why God?
This was the one,
the only son.
Sarah and I have waited
for so long and now
you want us to give him back?

He's only begun to live.
Sarah and I have barely
scraped the surface
of our affection for him.
Is this what they mean
when they say,
"God gives
and God takes away"?
But not my son, my beloved son,
my Isaac!

I can't see it, God,
but I will do as you say.
I can't understand
what good will come of this,
but I will follow your will.
I will sacrifice my son.
I will give Isaac back to you.
I will slaughter my son.

Drenched in sweat now
the wood is ready now
the spark ignited,
the flames flash
and send smoke to the
dreary skies.
"But dad," Isaac asks.
"Where is the lamb?"

I tell him to lie down
close to the fire. Stay warm.
I raise my knife
and try to avoid his eyes,
but I can't.
I see terror in those eyes
and fear in that face
so young, so tender.
I have never loved him
as much as I do now.

My hand trembles
even as my trust grows
for God must have something
in mind here that my small
heart cannot see.
Stop! A voice shouts.
An invisible hand
holds back my arm
from delivering death
to my beloved son.

"Abraham,"
the voice is whispering now,
"This was not to test
your knowledge of me.
This was to test your heart.



You have passed this test of love.
You have been willing
to do the holy thing,
which is, always and everywhere,
what I, your God, desire.
Though you do not understand,
you never will. Your mind
will never know what this means.
But your heart will.

“You trusted me.
You would not keep your son
from me. Though you have
already tasted the bitterness
of loss even before you
struck a blow, you showed
you loved me even more
than you love this only son.

“Don’t you see, old man,
my love for you is wider
than the skies? And now,
your love for me is deeper
than the deepest
human relationship;
thicker than blood.”

As we walked home that evening,
after the ram caught in the bush
was given to God,
my son turned to me and asked,
“Father, what was that about?”
I tried to explain but the words
held no meaning for this son
of mine, this beloved one.

“Some day, Isaac,” I said.
“You will know.
Some day, when you have
children of your own,
you will know.”

Isaac stopped and said,
“Know what, dad?”
I looked at the sky
just now turning to dusk.
The stars were just beginning
to blanket the earth.
“You will know from what
source your love flows.”

We walked in silence
until we reached home.
Sarah was waiting on the porch.
Now the sky was full of stars.
“I have never seen
so many stars,” she said.
And then she asked,
“How was your day?”

Joseph Nassal, CPPS

Hope

By Benita Volk, CPPS

Hope is no soft thing
With white wings.
It charges from black crevasses.
Its claws in my hair
Drag me to a place
Where lightning rattles the ground.
I find tough, charred feathers
In my fist.

The soft white things hide
When its harsh call
Lashes wounds into the cliffs.
I put my fingers in the scars
And start to climb.

Benita Volk was elected to the Provincial Council for the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood, Dayton, OH in July, 1995. Prior to moving to Dayton last summer, Benita lived and taught creative writing and literature in Denver, CO.

The Service of Animation

By Barry Fischer, CPPS

Childhood experiences and adventures have a way of making their marks on our way of thinking and perceiving things. I still think of “Bugs Bunny”, “The Road Runner”, “Donald Duck” and other cartoon characters, when I hear the word “animation” spoken. Animated cartoons were much a part of our childhood life.

Yet today the word “animation” has become very much a part of our vocabulary when we talk about what we call our members to when they are elected to leadership in our community. We are called to be “animators”. I guess we could say, just as a cartoonist brings to life the sketches on his pages, we are called to “bring to life” and to “keep alive” our membership.

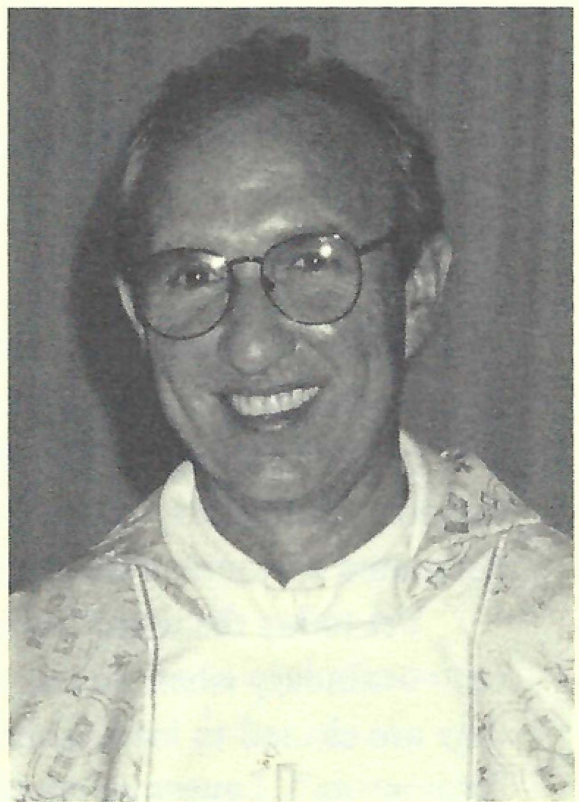
We would rather use more biblical images to express what our call to animation implies: like the Prophet Ezekiel who called the Spirit upon the dry bones scattered on the plains and which then joined together and took on life, we are called to inspire and to motivate our membership to see and to bring about new life, where death and gloom

seem to abound. Or, we might prefer Luke's account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus whose dream had died on Calvary. They were down-hearted and disillusioned and were returning to the monotony of their everyday living, when Jesus joined up with them and through listening to them, and conversing with them, they slowly began to re-ignite the dream and finally became filled with zest and enthusiasm to proclaim the Risen Lord!

The Role of Leadership Today

At times I hear members say, our General Government really doesn't have any authority. They are just figure-heads. The real decisions are made on the local level of the Provinces, Vicariates, and Missions. We are indeed a very decentralized Congregation. Yet in recent years our membership has been calling our General Government to take on a more active role in the animation of our international community.

Yes, we are freed from much of the nitty-gritty legislative tasks and decision-making such as the assignment of personnel, in order to do this very essential task, one which is vital to our very existence. For if a community loses its zest for life, if she lets her dreams fade and die, if she no longer believes in her future, there will be none.



Barry Fischer, CPPS

What Is Animation?

When we speak of animation it is important first of all to understand what is NOT. We are not talking about fantasizing or about day-dreaming. We are not speaking of some lofty ideal-

ism, disconnected from reality. To be a true animator we must have one foot on the ground as we keep before us the vision to strive towards in concrete steps. The ministry of animation is about keeping the dream alive. When we joined the community, we all had a vision and we were filled with dreams we hoped to realize. We were willing to leave everyone and everything in order to go forth in the quest of that dream. It is what motivated us and kept us going over the years.

But often circumstances and experiences tend to dampen those dreams and to make us lose confidence in them. Sometimes we can end up embittered and disillusioned, tempted to throw in the towel. We look at younger inspired members with a smirk on our face and think: "Give them time; they will wake up and face reality!"

To be a good animator, we must first of all have a dream and a vision we believe in. We must be on fire with that dream and it must burn inside us and seek for ways to express itself and to communicate it to others. For it is indeed a fire that consumes us and wishes to spread. This implies an underlying hope that is based on the belief that the dream is indeed attainable and worth the effort. It is not passivity. We don't sit around waiting for the dream to become reality by some wave of a magic wand, nor do we wait for others to make the dream a reality for us. We go out there and take concrete steps to make that dream into a reality in our lives. We believe it is worth the effort, that it is worth the sacrifice, that it is worth even misunderstanding, criticism, hardships.

St. Gaspar certainly had a dream that he believed in. He knew how to share that dream and to draw others into it. Our community was founded because of Gaspar's dream and his ability to attract others to share in the dream. Over the decades, others have been enthused by that same dream and it has been passed from generation to generation. We are entrusted now with his dream and challenged to keep it alive and to find new and creative ways of expressing that dream in our day

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and age and in our culture.

To achieve this, we need good community support. The disciples on the road to Emmaus needed to walk in the company of the Risen Lord and to share their story with Him and to reflect together on the meaning of what was happening around them. It was in that fraternal dialogue that their old dream that died was rekindled and brought to life. The dream once again burned inside them. As we are called to animate our religious communities, we must be good communicators. We must believe in dialogue. We must have time to listen to one another and to share our life stories. In this particular style of servant leadership, it is essential to promote good communication through a variety of means such as person-to-person contact, letter writing, phone calls, and through the realization of workshops, retreats and other meetings in which we can share our dreams and keep the vision which enlivens and motivates us ever before us. And we must do this not just in our local communities and in the province, but across the continents. As an international community it is important that we have good and fluid communication of our dreams and visions. It is important that we share our experiences of how the dream is enfolded in our apostolates and in our community living. This is essential for the animation of our community.

A Collaborative Effort

It is easy to get disillusioned as we strive to put flesh onto our dreams. We need to walk with others. Animating our members in community requires a lot of strength and requires of us to be continually rekindling the dream within us. We who have been called to general leadership also need the provincial and vicariate directors to share this ministry of animation. We can't go it alone. It must be a collaborative effort. We need to be there for one another, to support and to challenge, and to keep the dream alive in ourselves. Our sincere and frank communication is necessary to hope that we can indeed realize the dream. Only animated and enthusiastic leaders will be able to call others to life. As our brothers who are called to the ministry of

service as animators on the local level, have to face many difficult and challenging and oftentimes draining situations and make difficult decisions, they particularly need the support and encouragement of general leadership.

Celebrated and Renewed in the Eucharist

The Eucharist for us is a special moment. The disciples of Emmaus celebrated their rekindled dream as they sat at table with Jesus and broke bread with Him. And so we as communities of the Precious Blood bring our dreams and visions to the Eucharistic Table, where they are enlightened, clarified, challenged, and called to conversion by the Word of God. As we share a common bread and as we drink from the chalice, we renew our commitment to one another and our commitment to continue to struggle to make that dream which unites us a reality in our everyday lives. We are nourished by the Blood and sent forth by the Blood to bring life where there is death and to bring hope where despair has set in, and to bring hope where disillusionment and skepticism undermines the fabric of our community. It is in sharing the Eucharistic Cup that the fire is rekindled!

We go forth now, renewed and strengthened by the days we have spent together. We took time to envision and to dream, and we tried to map out possible ways of bringing this dream and vision down to reality for our membership. Like the disciples of Emmaus who made the journey in the company of Jesus and who broke bread with Him, we now go forth with our dream burning in our bellies, anxious and thrilled to be able to communicate that dream to our brothers and

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hope-filled because we know that in spite of the difficulties and challenges we will face, the dream can become reality and that it is indeed worth striving for and sacrificing to achieve!

We are living in a special age. As we approach the dawn of the third millennium we are living a moment of *kairos* in our congregation. We face an opportunity which may never come again! The service of a leadership who believes in our future and who is filled with a vision and can effectively communicate and share it with others, searching for concrete ways to implement the vision in our daily lives and ministries, can serve as mid-wife in the re-birthing of our community today. Only in the creative fidelity to the founding vision of St. Gaspar, will our Congregation be refounded as a vital community at the service of the building of the Reign of God and the dawning of a new humanity.

The fire that was rekindled in us during the General Assembly was symbolized in the candle presented to me on the day of my election to the Ministry of Animation. I now share that light with all of you. Together we go forth in hope to set the world on fire!



For Reflection

Compare the dreams you had when you first began your journey to the dreams you have now. How have your dreams changed?

Remember a time when you were tempted to “throw in the towel.” What or who allowed you to changed your mind? If someone reached out to you, look around to see who might need you now to keep his or her dream alive.

How could you better support leadership in your own congregation.

With New Eyes: Signs of Hope for Religious Life

By Andrée Fries, CPPS

The unthinkable happened – God broke into our world through the incarnation of Jesus! Since that marvelous moment, nothing has been the same. We now stand on the threshold of a new millennium. How do we, those who are covenanted in the Precious Blood of Jesus, incarnate Christ's redeeming love in these times? Is our hope in Jesus' continuing presence within and among us still alive as this new era dawns?

We live in a time of incredible change. We are bombarded by overwhelming amounts of seemingly unrelated information and incongruities; we live life at breakneck speed. I sense among us a profound search for meaning in this time of overwhelming changes. Sandra Schneiders, IHM wonders if this experience is akin to the dark night of the soul, a "dangerous, purgatory process from the known to a radically new experience of God."

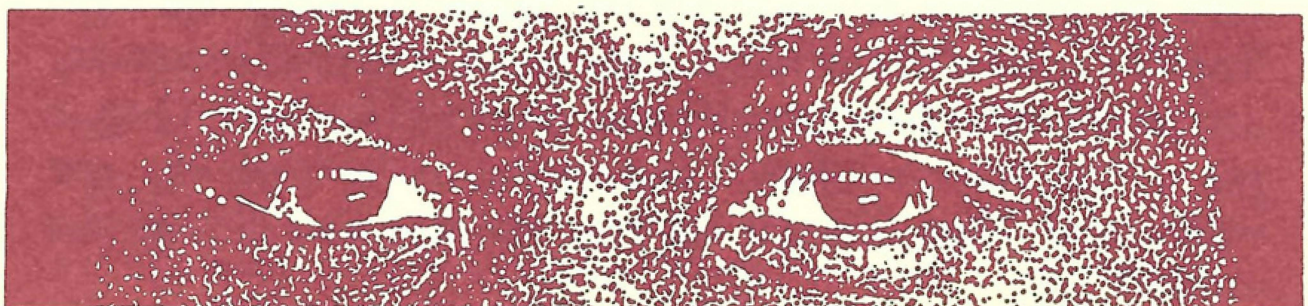
We all are immersed in this mysterious Paschal journey. We all have our moments of doubt and our flashes of insight and faith. Together we search for meaning and purpose in these times of unclarity and change. What does this ambiguous, chaotic, ambivalent experience say to our Precious Blood Congregations as we enter the new millennium? What is it that will keep our hope alive through this turmoil?

Our congregations, like any living organism, change over time. Throughout these changes, essential identity remains constant. Though each of us is vastly different than we were as infants, we are essentially the same person. The same is true of our congregations. Though our congregations have grown and changed, our essential identity in the Precious Blood of Jesus is constant. Each developmental stage cultivates unique strengths and poses specific challenges. Successful growth and development require awareness of this unfolding newness contextualized by the reality of our surroundings. How are we being called to grow and develop into the new millennium?

We are reminded in the resurrection stories how very easy it is to miss the signs of newness, of new life. The disciples knew how to respond to death, and the women, in particular, went about the practical tasks of caring for Jesus' body, getting on with life without Him. Yet in the midst of doing these ordinary, familiar things, the new erupted. How hard it was to recognize Jesus! Mary thought He was the gardener; the disciples on the way to Emmaus, a traveler. They saw what they expected out of their vision of "how things are" not of "how things could be."

I believe we will find our clearest signs of "what can be" by looking for "what is different" in our experience, by looking with resurrection eyes to see the new. What are the new riches, opportunities and challenges among us?

I suggest that signs of newness may be described in four areas: (1) our geographic diversity within a global village, (2) the substantive collaboration in spirit and mission among us, (3) the riches of our senior members, (4) the fruitfulness of the blood of our martyrs. How is God speaking to us through these new realities?



Geographic Diversity in the Global Village

We live in a global village, an ever smaller world, bound together by instantaneous communication and the information super highway. Our economy is global, intertwined in elaborate stock markets and influenced by multi-national corporations. Information is power, giving control and advantage to those who have access. The world of the 21st century will be interdependent in ways never before envisioned.

We, as Precious Blood family, may be more geographically spread throughout the world now than at any other time in our history. We have members in the far north, in Alaska and Finland; in the far South, in Chile, Bolivia and Peru; in the turbulent countries of Bosnia and Guatemala; in newly freed Siberia and Estonia; in the emerging nations of Korea and India; in many parts of Europe and all over the United States.

If we utilize our geographic diversity to promote a common focus, a corporate mission, imagine how we could be about the mission of Jesus. Our members serving outside the U.S. can bring to us a heightened and personalized awareness of the justice issues in the countries in which they serve. If those of us throughout the U.S. would activate a concerted, corporate response and lobby our many congressional representatives, we could have a significant impact. We could organize our power to effect change, to be instruments of Christ's reconciling love. Multi-national corporations strategize to capitalize on their world-wide presence for profit and power. Should we not be "wise as serpents" and use our

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world-wide presence to influence for the good of humankind? Is this perhaps one of God's calls to us given our diverse geographic presence in the global village in this age of instant communication?

Collaboration in Spirit and Mission

Thirteen years ago the Precious Blood family began to collaborate "in spirit and mission" within the United States. Thus far, we have stayed on safe ground; we have shared retreats and workshops with the high points of the Precious Blood Congresses. We have discovered one another, prayed and played together as family. In the

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past several years, our leadership ventured further in collaboration by giving both time and financial resources to the formation of the Precious Blood Leadership Conference (PBLC).

Forming the PBLC is no small step. Collaboration costs more than an annual check to our new office. Each leader has made a priority commitment to meet twice a year. Significant portions of these meetings are spent in faith sharing, listening, mentoring one another, and in

living PBLC's goal of reconciliation in our relationships with one another. The commitment of these men and women to minister with and to one another for the sake of our greater common mission gives me hope for the future of our congregations and of the Church.

Yet, I know that extending this substantive collaboration among our membership is a risky proposal. Sometimes the differences in our expressions of spirituality mask our deeper commonality in charism and mission. We may be fearful that our congregation's unique expression of our common spirituality will be diluted, or that another's spiritual

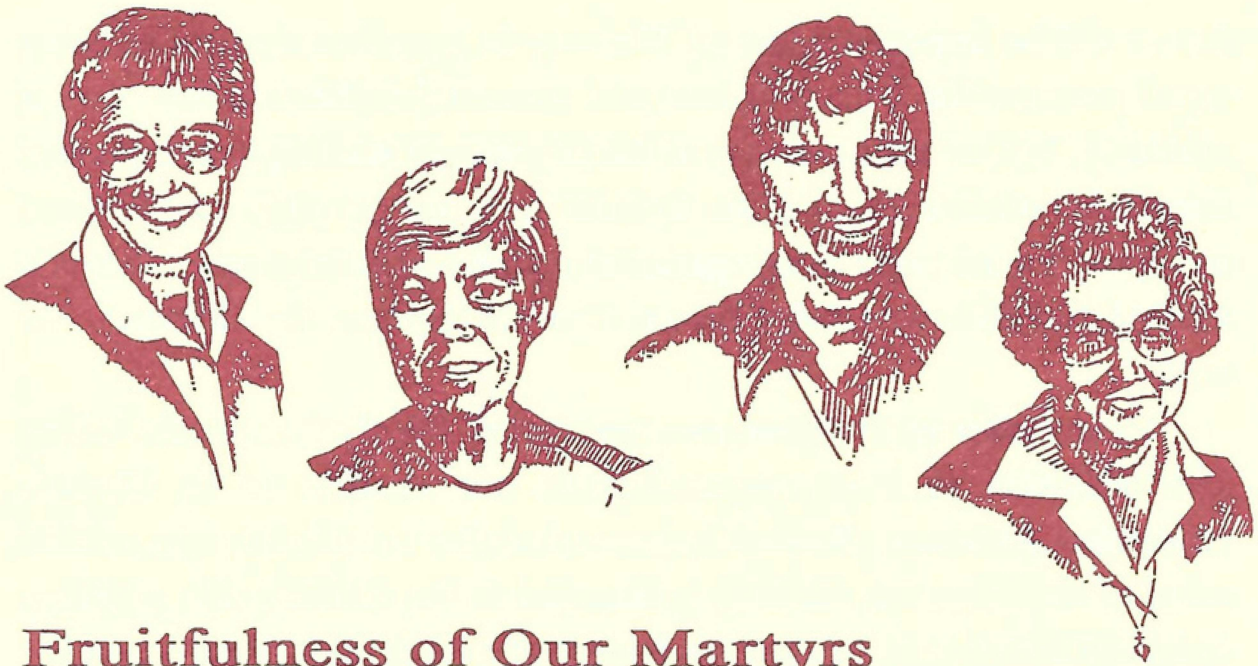
flavor will be imposed upon us. We may be apprehensive about being equal peers within a team of men and women: brothers, sisters, priests and laity. We are keenly aware of the exigency of staffing our respective corporate ministries, and we wonder how we possibly could spare members for an inter-congregational collaborative ministry. This is a time of diminishment, not a time to venture the new, the different -- or is it?

Fear makes us cautious, even paralyzed. Paralysis is death dealing and prohibits us from responding to our mission to be Christ's redeeming presence. Research shows that the availability of a critical mass of members for ministry is essential to the viability of a religious congregation. Alone we may not have that critical mass of members for mission much longer; together we may. Can we afford **not** to risk the new, the unknown?

Riches of Our Senior Members

Many of our members are retired, or soon to be. Never before in the history of religious life have we had so many members drink so deeply of Jesus' cup of physical frailty. Never before have we had the reservoir of wisdom and tested holiness our senior members share with us. Never before have we had this powerhouse of prayer, of generativity to root our corporate mission so deeply in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus. I truly believe this makes an incredible difference, a gift worth far more than any other resource we've ever had.

Yet, what real difference is this making? How is God calling us to build on this rich endowment and profound legacy among us? Our senior members lived with zeal and fidelity through the depression, wars, and hardship. What zeal and risk can they now expect of us? I really believe the fruitfulness of their daily surrender and their desire that we continue to proclaim Jesus' life-giving love compels us to be just as creatively faithful and zealous. We stand upon the shoulders of powerful intercessors, and we have the example of their fidelity to urge us on in our own struggles to find meaning and purpose in these ambivalent, promise-filled times.



Fruitfulness of Our Martyrs

Certainly a painful new experience is that of our recent martyrs, our Sisters Adorers of the Blood of Christ Agnes Mueller, Kathleen McGuire, Mary Joel Kolmer, Shirley Kolmer and Barbara Ann Muttra, and our Precious Blood brother, Hubert Mattle. I don't pretend to know the implications of the blood of these martyrs for our spirit and mission as Precious Blood Family. I do know that their intense participation in Jesus' Paschal Mystery must have a powerful impact on us, one with much potential to bear fruit. Will we remember their ultimate sacrifice in the true Biblical sense of remembering? Will their selfless giving of their lives inspire us to lay down our own lives in daily fidelity to our call to be "Precious Blood?" We cannot help but be changed in our very depths knowing our sisters' and brother's blood has been poured out with the Blood of the Lamb in solidarity with that of so many of the suffering and oppressed.

*We cannot help but be changed...
knowing our sisters' and brother's blood
has been poured out...*



Moving Forward in Hope

These are but four new realities that I see among us – signs that stand as beacons of hope pointing us onward in God’s favor and fidelity. These are only some of the perhaps unnoticed, undiscovered signs of the resurrection springing up in our midst. What else is new? How can we respond together as men and women covenanted in the Precious Blood of Jesus? This is truly a time for discovery of how to be missionary in this global village, for risking substantive collaboration in spirit and mission, for building on the living heritage available in our senior members, for tapping into the fruitfulness of the blood of our martyrs. This is a time for hope!



For Reflection

What signs of newness do you see in your own branch of the Precious Blood family and among all of us?

In what ways might we risk coming together in order that we might have a “critical mass” for mission?

How might we tap the richness of our geographic diversity, the PBLC and potential for collaboration, our senior members, and our martyrs?

On the Margins of Hope

By Jerry Stack, CPPS

A friend of mine shared with me a remark overheard at a conference of gays and lesbians: “It’s easier to see the center from the margins than it is to see the margins from the center.”

That insightful comment has led me to reflect on my experiences in ministry with some people “on the margins,” particularly my experience of being a chaplain at a state hospital for the mentally ill. It speaks of the lack of vision of many of those “at the center,” of a real inability to see those on the edges or to enter with compassion their reality. Those who are marginal are often invisible – or at least some would like them to be.

At the same time, that comment suggests also that those on the margins are able to see the center more easily. They are acutely aware of the blessings of being at the center from which they have been excluded. Those pushed to the boundaries and away from the center are often able to see another kind of center, that Center which is the ground of a profound hope.

In this article I would like to reflect on how that experience of being on the periphery, on the edges, can be a gateway to a profound and healthy hope. People who find themselves in this situation can at times become marginal in their hope, but often move beyond this to a remarkable hope on the margins.

God at Home on the Margins

Some years ago I was very moved by a simple experience. I encountered a patient who stopped to talk to me for awhile. I knew her and still keep in touch with her although she has left our facility. At one point she told me, “God is so good. I am so thankful for all that he has done for me.”

A fairly conventional statement for a person of faith, I suppose. What struck me was that here was a woman in her early fifties who had been sick the major portion of her adult life, who had very few possessions and who certainly had accomplished little by conventional standards. Yet she was thankful for the little she had, delighted by the ordinary (we might say even dull) experiences of her everyday life in the hospital and extremely generous to others.

This was not an isolated experience. I found that it was repeated over and over again in the lives of hundreds of patients. Another former patient with whom I’ve been friends for twelve years spoke about his experiences of being homeless from time to time. The mere thought of being without a home could send waves of anxiety over me; he talked about it as if it were the most natural thing in the world. His faith, he explained, gets him through these periods.

Granted, people with serious mental illness are sometimes not “in touch with reality” as the saying goes. Many people would like to think that the mentally ill don’t know what they’re missing, don’t really know how sick and disabled they are, perhaps. But I cannot dismiss such faith, such hope, as merely part of a mental illness. There is something about living on the margins which can be a catalyst for a powerful faith

There is something about living on the margins which can be a catalyst for a powerful faith and a surprising and wonderful hope and trust.

and a surprising and wonderful hope and trust. It shouldn't be surprising. The history of salvation is the history of people on the margins drawing strength, wisdom, and perseverance from a God who was inclined "to choose the weak to shame the strong (1 Cor 1,27)."

The story of Israel is the story of a weak and insignificant people who lived on the margins of various empires who somehow managed to be the object of special favor and choice by God. The story of Jesus reveals a God who makes the powerful and unambiguous statement of his love and forgiveness through the weak and powerless. Jesus was

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born on the outskirts of an insignificant town in southern Israel. His birth is witnessed by the shepherds who lead a marginal existence and who are objects of suspicion by many folks more "at the center." He later associates with tax collectors, praises Samaritans and even talks to a much-married Samaritan woman, and freely welcomes sinners to his fellowship. He ends his short life outside the city of Jerusalem, shedding his blood between two criminals. A recent

book described Jesus as a "marginal Jew."

The Scriptures proclaim to us in no uncertain terms: God is to be found on the margins. St. Paul expressed his own experience of Jesus' speaking to him precisely through his own experience of being weak and marginal. He recounts his own experience of Jesus telling him that "power is made perfect in weakness. So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me (2 Cor 12,9)."

In working with the mentally ill, as well as with other marginalized persons like gays and lesbians and persons with AIDS, I have often found a profound hunger for God and a deep and abiding sense of God's presence, goodness, and love. They have lived their own lives,

their own experiences of exclusion and loss. These “marginal” people are often deeply spiritual and have a surprisingly hope-filled attitude toward life. It is as if being on the outskirts, being aware that one can find little support from the center, that one becomes more aware of one’s own contingency, one’s alienation from others and self, one’s emptiness – and that it is only the Lord who can speak with wholeness and healing to these realities of life.

It is little wonder that over the centuries those who seek a deeper experience of the Holy deliberately marginalize themselves in service of that quest. Anthony of Egypt sought the “white martyrdom” of the hermit’s life in the desert; Benedict’s monasticism sought much the same in the context of a stable but separate community. German pietists, like the Old Order Amish, continue to live a marginal life, taking literally 2 Cor 6, 17: “Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord.” The examples could be multiplied in both Christian and non-Christian traditions alike.

On the Margins with the Mentally Ill

For some people, like those with serious mental illness, being a marginal person is not a matter of decision but of biological destiny. Persons suffering from these illnesses – schizophrenia, depression, bipolar (manic-depressive) illness, and organic brain disorders – are truly among the most marginal people in our society. Their diseases often cause them to act in very strange, even frightening ways, and they may be disabled for lengthy periods of time, even for life. They make up a substantial percentage of the homeless in our cities (perhaps as much as thirty to fifty per cent by some estimates) and increasingly are drawn into the criminal justice system for want of an effective way to provide care for them.

In addition to the shattering effects of their mental illness, these people must deal with something that is also devastating: misunderstanding, prejudice, and stigma. It doesn’t take much scanning of our media (newspapers, television, movies) to catch the stereotypes. What makes it all the more galling is that the mentally ill are about the only

“safe” targets left; no other group would sit back and let people make such outrageous statements. The mentally ill, of course, often are not able to speak effectively for themselves and until only recently have had few advocates in the public arena.

For all too many mentally ill persons the burden is too much to bear. The rates of substance abuse (self-medication) and suicide are much higher than that of the general population. For others, however, the burden is bearable because of a surprising and powerful trust and a hope-filled way of seeing themselves and the world.

Those who end up in facilities like the one where I minister could well see their motto in the inscription Dante places over the inferno: “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.” Yet so many do not abandon hope and instead become people of hope, people of great trust, people on the margins who clearly can see the center.

Again and again I am amazed and humbled by the simple confidence and optimism of people who could be bitter and despairing. They notice the little events and everyday wonders of life. A cup of coffee and some cookies are treats to be savored. Many wonder where God can be when they see those with mental disabilities and their sufferings, their losses. Many of the mentally ill have an unshakable hope and confidence in a God who embraces and supports them, of a God who has made an everlasting covenant sealed in the Blood of Jesus Christ.

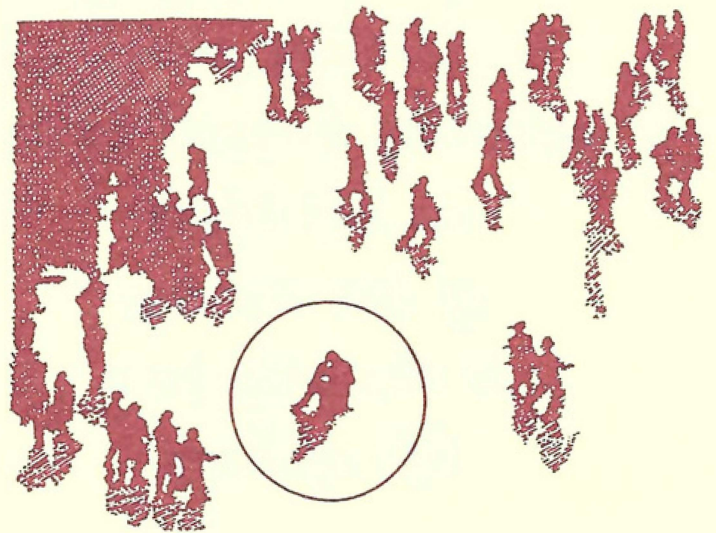
God Alone Affords Hope

I used to visit regularly a hospice and found that it was a house of joy. Of course, there were problems and complaints. There was illness. There was death, but these people, already marginalized because they were gay or substance abusers or both, lived life with an amazing hope, full of a sense of wonder and gratitude for the ordinary miracles of life. I remember, with great fondness, going to see a re-release of *Pinocchio* with a man living in the hospice. It was a wonderfully rich experience made all the richer for our wondering what people would think of these two middle-aged guys going to see a Disney

feature. Not long afterwards we celebrated the sacraments of initiation with him in his room at the hospice because he had suddenly become too sick to go to the local parish church as planned. His life-long desire to enter the Church was at last fulfilled.

People who live on the margins don't have the many "advantages" that those of us who are more at the center do have. They know in the pattern of their lives that great truth which we people of faith profess: "For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress. I shall never be shaken (Ps 62, 1-2)."

At the center of hope is a profound awareness of the psalmist's words that God alone offers me salvation, security, hope. Those of us fortunate enough not to have ended up on the margins of life may have more difficulty in living the conviction that "God alone is my rock and salvation" because there are so many other things which appear to offer us salvation, so many things which hold out the promise of hope, so many things in which we mistakenly place our trust.



It should not surprise us, then, that the great blood covenants were made with people who were not prominent or powerful or at the center of things. Abraham was one among many nomads. Why would God choose to enter into a covenant with a marginal person and his family? The Hebrews had been oppressed and enslaved in Egypt, leading a miserable existence. After their liberation they were wandering around in the Sinai peninsula, leading a precarious reality. Again, a covenant is struck with a people on the periphery, on the boundaries. These were people ripe for covenant since they knew from their own marginal lives a hunger for the holy, an emptiness for a love and a hope which only Yahweh could fill.

The blood of the covenant of Jesus Christ is the blood of a "marginal Jew" who lived and died in the company of many marginal

people. In the words of Philippians: “[He] emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross (Phil 2, 7-8).”

In the same passage, Paul urges us to “have the same mind”, the mind of Jesus, the marginal one, in ourselves. We also need to see that Jesus’ life, a life of emptying, letting go, allowing himself to be on the

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edges of his society, is the way to a life of hope. Jesus, son of God, reveals that fullness of life comes from being empty, from recognizing one’s radical dependence on God, from being with those on the periphery.

From what we know of early Christian history, the people of the new covenant were much like those of the old. They were largely from among the poor, the disenfranchised and the weak. There is a sense in the Christian Scriptures, especially in

the letters of Paul, that Christians are in some ways a marginal sect in the Roman empire.

As church we are a missionary community which recalls in its liturgy, life, and work those great blood covenants, especially that of Jesus. We also embrace those on the fringes, the weak, the foolish, the excluded, for it is with such as these that God has made God’s covenant. Indeed, they are the ones who often were most open to the presence of God because their own weakness rendered them aware of their basic need for God. The history of the great covenants is a history of God choosing the weak, the broken, the insignificant, those on the margins.

Covenant of Hope in the Blood

The covenant is for all people. In the kingdom, all are invited. All are welcome at the table because the blood has already been poured out. “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly (Rom 5,6).”

God is waiting to show his power among the weak, the powerless, the forgotten, the excluded, and God call us as covenant people to proclaim that the covenant sealed in the blood of Jesus embraces all. As disciples of the Lord we stand ready to awaken in others the joy and liberation of knowing that they are people of Jesus’ all-embracing and ever-lasting covenant.

The Blood calls out to us from the lives of those who find themselves on the margins. Yes, we are called to be with them, to accompany them, to have table fellowship with them as did Jesus. A spirituality of the Blood of Christ challenges us to recognize that Blood was shed for them, and that the Blood is still being shed in their struggles, their diminishment. We must stand with them, “go outside the gates, outside the camp (Heb 13, 11-14).”

At the same time we must recognize that these same people have a ministry to us. It is the ministry of confidence in diminishment, trust in suffering and loss, of hope on the margins. We have much to gain in reflecting on the hope we find in those who by rights should have no hope.

For many of those at the margins of life, seeing Jesus, the Center, is sometimes easier than for those of us who are not there on the fringes. These people of hope have taught me much about hope and about the spirituality of the Precious Blood. I have much yet to learn from them.

Many of those who suffer from mental illness continue to offer me the gift of hope, a sense of quiet wonder and gratitude for those things which I might otherwise take for granted. People with AIDS have shown me so much about life even as they were dying. The hope of these people, forged and strengthened in the furnace of illness, suffering, stigma, and loss, continues to amaze and humble me. Slowly I am coming to realize that being “outside the gate, outside the camp” is

often where God speaks most powerfully and where hope is most vibrant.

On the margins there is indeed hope.



For Reflection

Do I experience being marginal in my own life? In what situations? How do I cope with those experiences?

Who are the marginal people I encounter? What have I allowed them to teach me?

Have I marginalized individuals or groups of people by my attitudes, my behavior? How does a spirituality of the Blood of Christ speak to those situations?