

Remembering the Liberian Martyrs

Blood of Christ, Courage of Martyrs, Save Us

On November 1, the feast of All Saints, we heard John's familiar vision from the book of Revelation. "Who do you think these are, all dressed in white? And where have they come from?" Our answer that day included these names: Sr. Barbara Ann Muttra, Sr. Mary Joel Kolmer, Sr. Shirley Kolmer, Sr. Kathleen McGuire, Sr. Agnes Mueller. These Adorers of the Blood of Christ, the novices, and countless others who have died in Liberia "are the ones who have survived the great period of trial; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

On the morning of October 31 when I first heard the National Public Radio report saying that five American nuns were murdered in Liberia, I recalled that the ASCs from Ruma had a mission in that country named for freedom. But no more. They are all dead. Now their blood is on our hearts, our minds, our memories, our lives.

Information about the killings was difficult to get that day since presidential politics and polls dominated the headlines. But then I saw Sr. Mildred Gross, ASC, provincial of the Ruma Adorers, at a press conference talking about these martyrs of her community. And Sr. Mary Ann Mueller, ASC, reflecting on her sister's commitment to the poor.

The witness of these sisters of ours and the words of their stunned community members reminded me of those words we pray so often: "Blood of Christ, Courage of Martyrs, Save us." What courage these women showed as they sought to be ministers of reconciliation in a country divided by civil war. They lived the liberation of the blood of Christ and died in love's service.

Blood of martyrs Mary Joel, Shirley, Kathleen, Agnes, and Barbara Ann, remember us. May your blood call us to see there can be no peace without justice. May your blood call us to hear again the cries and sighs of the poor. May your blood call us to touch the wounds of the oppressed. May your blood call us to taste the bitter sorrow of grieving family and community members so devastated by your loss. May your blood call us to smell the scents of resurrection we believe will blossom from the blood-stained soil of Liberia because of your witness.

Even as we are convinced that you now rest in the peace of God's heart, may your lives of commitment convince us to be compassionate; may your deaths disturb us enough to see how far we have to go to make the reign of justice and peace a reality in our world. May your lives inspire us with courage. May your names live on in our memory so that when we are tempted to give up or give in, your martyrdom will remind us to keep seeking, keep pushing, keep proclaiming the peace found in the blood of the cross.

May all communities who claim for their charism the blood of Christ, resolve to remember October 31 as the feast day of these modern day martyrs. For in the spirit of Maria and Gaspar, these women gave their lives and shed their blood in the name of Christ. Their blood becomes a seed of reconciliation in a country and a world crying out for peace. Yes, next year, on October 31, may we celebrate the feast of the **Five Adorers of the Blood of Christ and their Companions** and so remember their courage and our commitment to be people of reconciliation.

(Fr. Joseph Nassal, C.P.P.S., "Blood of Christ, Courage of Martyrs, Save Us," The New Wine Press, November 25, 1992, Vol. 2, Issue 4)

Echoes in Our Hearts

Our charism of living out the Paschal mystery signified by the shedding of the Precious Blood of Jesus in his passion and crucifixion has taken on a whole new dimension in the willingness of Agnes, Barbara Ann, Joel, Kathleen, and Shirley to spill their blood for work they believed in and people they had learned to love. Their deaths have given us inspiration and are a source of pride and wonderment.

It certainly has helped me realize more what Precious Blood spirituality is', observes Sister Marita Toenjes. 'Here is the shedding of blood of people I knew, people I grew up with, people I am related to.'

'Who are we?' asks Sister Marcia Kruse, a missionary to Bolivia, in a poem written after the death of the Liberian missionaries. 'We are they who profess to follow the Lamb wherever he goes./ ... / He invites. Deeper, come deeper into the mystery./ ... Deeper into the mystery. Loving, giving, bleeding along the way./ Tough faith for tough times./ But joy, down deep, of being transformed into Christ.../ All the while walking into the jaws of hell./ Hell! Makes you want to throw up./ The inhumanity, murder, mutilation/ .../ Our hearts are shredded, bleeding with his./ Our tears, mixed with his./ What are we doing here?/ We are --we are-- just following the Lamb./ Africa, Latin America, Europe, America./ No, we don't want to get killed./ We simply want to follow the Lamb -- wherever he goes.'

Marcia's co-worker in La Paz, Sister Anne Irose, writes, 'The five martyrs lived their charism of the Blood of Christ. Perhaps they didn't talk so much about it or use eloquent language. But they certainly lived the charism. This has made a deep impression on me. I believe these five are models for our whole congregation. We can get caught up in talking beautifully about the charism of the Blood of Christ. The lives of Shirley, Agnes, Kathleen, Barbara Anne, and Joel are living testimonies for us. Their lives and deaths speak volumes.'

Sister Ann Fearday adds, 'Embracing the Paschal Mystery is not often easy, but that is the heart of what we are about as Adorers of the Blood of Christ.' Sister Agnesine Jansen continues Ann's thought, 'For me these deaths have deepened the awareness and reality of the Paschal Mystery in my life. Before this, I never thought of or dreamt of having lived with one --much less five-- Sisters who gave their lives carrying out their daily ministry and becoming martyrs of charity. These deaths,' Sister Agnesine goes on, 'have also deepened my faith. If we are faithful in our daily living, in carrying out our ordinary deeds out of love of God and his people, he will give us the strength and courage when big things are asked of us.'

Sister Janet Marie Wilhelm defines the martyrdom required for living out the Paschal Mystery: 'I think martyrdom is giving one's life day by day.' Sister Flora Santel, working in pastoral ministry in West Plains, Missouri, adds, 'We are known as Precious Blood Sisters. We are part of the redemptive act.'

Sister Mary Pauline Grady, community historian and a prison chaplain in Springfield, Missouri, sees a 'new depth of meaning to the blood of the chalice. Their blood, our blood, Jesus' blood is interconnected. I am a cup in which this blood has been sacrificed.' Sister Mary Shaw sees hope in the shedding of the blood of the five missionaries. 'Their life and their death calls us all to live out our charism,' she adds. 'This has been a crucifixion,' Sister Janis Yaekel, who works with the Earthworks project in Plymouth, Indiana, adds. 'But out of this is going to come new life. Like a baby bird that we don't have to feed; God's going to feed it.'

(from M. Clare Boehmer, A.S.C. (comp.) Echoes in Our Hearts, 1994, p. 255-256)