

The Cry of the Poor The Blood of the Poor

The blood of the poor stops at our door. The prophet Isaiah says to us today as we spread our hands in prayer and raise our voices in praise: "Your hands are full of blood." Whose blood?

- the blood of men, women, and children martyred in Central America;
- the blood of South African blacks yearning for freedom;
- the blood of the homeless sleeping in the streets of St. Louis;
- the blood of the AIDS victim dying alone because of our fear;
- the blood of the migrant worker who labors for low wages and risks his life because of pesticides that poison his system;
- the blood of the children who seek sanctuary in our hearts and homes;
- the blood of the young mother who cradles her child as she shuffles slowly through the soup kitchen line;
- the blood of the worker locked out of the factory;
- the blood of the farmer exiled from his land, his life.

Their blood is on our hands. Their blood stains our apathy and colors our indifference. Isaiah commands us to wash their blood from our hands, not to remove responsibility in a Pilate-like act of cowardice; but to wash away our inactivity in a Christ-like act of courage: "Cease doing evil, learn to do good...seek justice, correct oppression, hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow."

These are the helpless and outcasts; the oppressed and injured; the neglected and abandoned; the forgotten and unforgotten. These are the ones to whom we are sent. The blood of the poor leaves a trail to our door. Their blood stops here.

Isaiah calls us to conversion...to commitment...to recapture the covenant won for us in the blood of the cross. As women and men banded together under the banner of the Precious Blood, our belief in Easter does not eclipse our memory of Calvary. Our nail-scarred Lord challenges us to rekindle the memory. "Do this in memory of me." We who are redeemed through the blood of Christ, are charged with the responsibility to re-member; to reconcile those members of the Body of Christ who have been forgotten. "In Christ Jesus," Paul says, "we who were once far off have been brought near through the blood of Christ." By embracing this responsibility, we forge a new genesis; a new creation; a new beginning of hope for our time.

To be a follower of Christ today means to be poor. Jesus identified himself with the outcast. His mission statement becomes our mission: "to bring glad tidings to the poor...liberty to captives...recovery of sight to the blind...release to prisoners." To announce to all those who fear they have fallen out of favor with the government, or with the church, or with society, to announce to them "a year of favor from the Lord."

A few years ago, I listened as a missionary from Nicaragua told a group of us of the murder of some of his parishioners by the Contra forces using guns and ammunition "made in the U.S.A." He echoed a familiar refrain but one that has particular relevance for us. "Hearing the Gospel has a lot to do with feet," he said, "it depends on where you stand. If you stand in the mud with the poor or if you stand on the plush carpets with the rich."

The oppressed, the marginalized, the outcasts have pulled us --sometimes kicking and screaming-- from the plush carpets and spacious halls to stand with them in the mud and blood that soaks their feet. We make a difference in bringing the light of the Gospel and the leaven of God's reign upon

our world when we stand with the poor. When we live in solidarity with those who are oppressed. When we huddle with the masses that endure injustice.

Ours must be a ministry of compassion. But to paraphrase Henri Nouwen, we cannot bring glad tidings to the poor if we are not willing to confront those who cause poverty; we cannot bring liberty to the captives if we are not willing to confront those who carry the keys; we cannot profess solidarity with those who are oppressed when we are not willing to confront the oppressor. True compassion leads to confrontation.

The force of our faith gives birth to this quality of compassion because we believe in a God who suffers with us. The basis for our hope is found in Paul's words to the Ephesians: "Christ is our Peace; Christ has broken down the barriers of hostility that kept us apart."

We are challenged today to become a "dwelling place for God." And we learn how to be that dwelling place from listening to the poor. God's face is seen so clearly today in the eyes of that frightened child seeking sanctuary; in the face of that tired young mother in the soup kitchen line; in the callused hands of that farmer and factory worker; in the haunting glance of the one who dies alone. They must know that God has not abandoned them; that God still loves them, breathes in them, lives in them. And we must know that God is with us to give us the courage of compassion. To touch their fears and tears with the reality of Calvary and the promise of Easter. After all, we believe God alone can save and lift us free on the wings of resurrection. But as Isaiah warns us, we must act on our belief. As religious men and women, we recapture Isaiah's vision and Jesus' mission of hope by becoming streams of mercy and compassion for victims of injustice.

Indeed, the spirit of the Lord is upon us; we are anointed by God to bring glad tidings to the poor by standing in solidarity with them; not keeping them at arm's length but embracing them with a compassion born of the cross.

- we are sent to bring liberty to captives by unlocking the doors slammed shut by greed with the keys of generosity, charity, and most of all, justice;
- we are sent to bring recovery of sight to those blinded by materialism; those blinded by the notion that every want is a need; those who see only possessions and lose sight of the dignity of the human person;
- we are sent to release those imprisoned by the bottom line of corporate profits; those who see only statistics and miss the sacredness of the individual; to those whose lives are imprisoned by militarism, we must show the way of peace; to those who see only dollar signs we must point out the signs that lead to the reign of God: meekness, humility, mercy, righteousness; to those whose energies are fueled by revenge, we must model reconciliation.

People who are imprisoned by policies that have no place in the Gospel of Jesus Christ must be freed. The bottom line is not found on a balance sheet but in the Scripture. Wherever dreams are planted and then wither; wherever suffering takes root and pain flourishes; wherever blood soaks the soil of parched lives, God is there. And we, if we are worthy of our name, must be there too.

As we gather around the table of Eucharist, we give witness to the blood that is on our hands. We raise our voices to the God of life. As we do, we bring with us the blood of all who yearn to be free from oppression, injustice, and economic violence. We bring them all -- the plea of the orphan, the cry of the widow, the lament of the lost -- we bring them all to the table of Jesus.

As we lay them here, along with our lives, sisters and brothers, we see that the blood stops here. The precious blood of the poor stops here at our altar and mingles with the Precious Blood of Christ to break down the barriers that keep us apart. In this remembering, we discover the peace that is Christ; the hope that is God; and the courage that is the Spirit. Though the blood stops here, it also flows from here in our lives poured out in loving service of the poor.

(Fr. Joseph Nassal, C.P.P.S., "The Blood of the Poor", Homily for Precious Blood Congress, St. Louis, Missouri, August 2, 1988)