

Coming Together to Celebrate Connections and Diversity

Precious Blood Spirituality Institute

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INTRODUCTION

Several weeks ago I woke up early on a Saturday morning and turned on the radio. Overnight our local NPR station airs the BBC. What was playing was one of a series of lectures from 2022 on President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms." What they were about to play was the lecture on freedom of worship by former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams. He was speaking in South Wales in the United Kingdom.

He opened with this: "And so to begin, let me set the scene in Pennsylvania. A private oil company has seized some farmland to build a natural gas pipeline. The landowners are not happy and have gone to court. So far, so familiar, but here's what's unusual, the farmland belongs to a Catholic women's religious order, and the nuns have argued that the pipeline violates their rights to liberty, specifically religious liberty."

Even though it was early and a Saturday morning, I stayed awake to listen because I was pretty sure I knew the Pennsylvania nuns he was referencing. It was us, the Adorers of the Blood of Christ! Dr. Williams continued, "'Every day since October 2018,' said one of the sisters, 'as fossil fuel and gas flows through our farmland so also flows Transco's blatant disregard and trampling of our religious beliefs.'" Dr. Williams said that on the face of it, this is a startling application of the language of religious freedom. As he understood the argument, the seizure of the community's field was an offence against religious liberty. It was forcing the community into complicity with fossil fuel exploitation and contrary to the sisters' religiously grounded beliefs about environmental responsibility.

As the lecture continues, Dr. Williams makes the case that freedom of worship and action because of one's religious beliefs are intertwined. He said, "[T]he Pennsylvania nuns are objecting that the integrity of their actual physical witness to their belief, their freedom to communicate what they hold to be true of God's relation to the world, is fatally compromised if their property is forcibly used in a way which contradicts what they hold to be true." In this context then, Dr. Williams invites his audience to think of worship not just as an occasional public ceremony but as a real-world response and expression of commitment to a certain truth which determines one's options for relating to one another as persons in society.

This story is not limited to those "green nuns" in Pennsylvania, but has application to all of us who serve under the banner of the Precious Blood. The Eucharist is central to our lives, but our worship is credible only if it is carried into our daily relationship with each other, society, and the whole earth community.

CHARISM AND SPIRITUALITY

We use the terms charism and spirituality in a variety of ways. Sometimes we use them interchangeably. I'd like to make a distinction for us as Precious Blood family.

Charism is like a seed planted in each of us. It is in our DNA, so to speak. Seeds hold promise. One time when I was here at the Precious Blood Center in Liberty I saw four o'clocks blooming and commented that we had them at home when I was a kid. That fall Jack McClure mailed a whole envelope of seeds to me and the next spring I planted them at our house in Red Bud. I knew they would be four o'clocks but I did not know what color the blooms would be. They turned out to be pink, orange and yellow. There's an analogy here that relates to us—same flower, different colors. Together they made quite a statement.

A year or so later I saw larkspurs growing in the sisters' garden boxes at Wichita. My grandma had larkspurs in her garden. I asked for seeds and that fall two different sisters sent me seeds. I threw the seeds in the garden and waited for them to come up the next spring. Unfortunately, I only had a few stray plants in the garden. I had saved some seeds and planted them the next fall. In spring I discovered once again that the same "weeds" that I carefully pulled the year before were all over the flower garden again. I let them grow. You guessed it, they were larkspurs. Here's another analogy. Sometimes the seed stays buried because we don't recognize it. Or we reject it. Nevertheless, God chose to dwell in our fragile and flawed lives—we are all miracles of godliness, each called to reveal the image of God within us. We are all members of the Precious Blood Family and our shared charism, the gift of reconciliation, grows and blooms in us only when we recognize it and cultivate it.

Our shared charism is a gift. Tony Gittins, CSSp, says that "the Church does not have a mission, the mission has a Church. The Charismatic Family does not have a charism, the charism has the Charismatic Family." All is gift. We need only open it.

Spirituality is how we live the charism. Each congregation has a distinct way of expressing reconciliation. Each part of the family, vowed and lay, has its own mission that extends from the charism. All express the charism through both prayer and action.

ADORERS OF THE BLOOD OF CHRIST

In describing our vocation in the Church, our Life Charter states: To be Adorers of the Blood of Christ means to be wholly consecrated to the adoring and redeeming love of Jesus Christ, who shed his blood to free us from sin and reconcile us in love. Accordingly, our congregation itself must become "a living image of that divine charity with which this blood was shed, and of which it was and is sign, expression, measure and pledge." (from the Preface of the 1857 Constitution) (para. 2)

Both individually and as a US Region of the Adorers, we continue to grow in our understanding of the redeeming love of Jesus. Our expanding knowledge of the cosmos

requires us to take a new look at our theology. We believe that we are redeemed not by justice but by mercy. Our focus has become less on restitution and more on the unconditional love of God. We believe that a great need exists in our world today to present God as Giver of Life. Jesus offered his blood as a source of life. Our region has a proposal to the upcoming General Assembly that 1. we study Creation Theology based on the understanding of Original Blessing as an alternative to the theology of Original Sin and 2. that we study and research how our charism can support the view of Original Blessing. (c.f., Precious Blood Spirituality in our World Today, a proposal to the XXII General Assembly, 2023)

Liturgically we celebrate the fact that the blood of Jesus again becomes the source of life. In the Letter to the Hebrews (9:2-3, 11-14) the author compares the death of Jesus with the Yom Kippur ceremony at the temple in Jerusalem when the high priest entered the Holy of Holies and sprinkled blood towards the Ark of the Covenant onto the propitiatory or mercy seat which rested on top of the Ark. This is where God was thought to be enthroned. The sprinkled blood signified the intimate flow of life between God and the people. There the shared life between God and the people found its full expression. Blood looks toward life, not death. Jesus' death on the cross is remembered as a sign of his love and dedication to us. In this bonding we share the same life-carrying blood. Every action of ours becomes an act of worship.

Atonement becomes "at-one-ment." We are called to create the harmony of our trinitarian God on earth. We are in communion with God and the paschal presence of the crucified Christ. We encounter the crucified Christ in each human life. We identify the call to a relational union with the crucified Christ. Diane Bergant, CSA, says, "Repentance should flow from the realization of God's steadfast love and mercy rather than from some debt we might think we owe God."

OUR LIFE IN ADORATION

In our Life Charter we read: Adoration is for us a love relationship with the Holy One in whom we are made one with the communion of saints. To grow in adoration means that our entire person, in all of our relationships and circumstances, in all our sinfulness and giftedness, becomes ever more fully surrendered with Jesus to the Father for the coming of the kingdom. (para. 27)

Our foundress, St. Maria De Mattias, spent long hours at the foot of the cross where she embraced her vulnerability and allowed God to transform her. Her suffering connected her to the suffering dear neighbor. She experienced not a dark night but more an invitation. At the foot of the cross Maria allowed God to love her. We are invited to that same encounter. It is that encounter that calls us to love others—our dear neighbor—as we love ourselves and know that we are loved by God. As Adorers we seek solitude, time for reflection. We, too, spend time at the foot of the cross to remember who we are in relation to God and others—to learn how to love. From solitude at the cross Maria went out in search of those places where people and all of God's creatures were in need. We, too, enter the human experience to bring life.

OUR LIFE IN MISSION AND MINISTRY

Mr. (Fred) Rogers said that “Listening is where love begins; listening to ourselves and then to our neighbor.” Actions are the fruit of our contemplation. We can’t stay at the foot of the cross. We must not just adorn our walls with crucifixes, we must be willing to be vulnerable and broken so that we can be credible witnesses to the power of God’s love. We are called to see the image of Jesus crucified in the suffering people of today’s world. We are moved from a privatized to a social spirituality to address the needs of the people of our time.

Our Vision Statement says, “Out of an awareness of our own brokenness and the wounds of the world, we Adorers choose life for ourselves and for others by being a compassionate presence wherever need touches our hearts.”

We live our charism in the ordinary events of each day, yet our spirituality is not static. In each age the Spirit helps us live our charism more faithfully. During Maria De Mattias’ time the sisters were focused on ministry in Italy. However, in the 1860s the Adorers did start a foundation in London after the hostile laws against the Catholic Church were no longer enforced in England. Apparently the foundation had many challenges and was short-lived, but it was rich in many ways: It spread devotion to the Blood of Christ and helped immigrant women and children. Adorers have not formally ministered in England since then. However, we did again touch the people of the United Kingdom from a distance as Dr. Williams described the commitment of the “green nuns” in Columbia, PA when he gave his lecture in South Wales on Freedom of Worship. A different focus, a different “dear neighbor,” but certainly the same congregation of committed Precious Blood women.

How Adorers express/live our spirituality is different in each country. E.g., the sisters in eastern Europe (Croatia, Poland, Siberia, Belarus) will give expression to ASC spirituality in circumstances different from the US Adorers. The war in Ukraine effects all of us but in Poland the sisters are helping with housing refugees and ministering to the refugees in different ways than we are in the US. We can send money, they are a physical presence. Even within a country, we live our spirituality in different ways depending on our time and place.

Our lives are about relationship. Maria urged us always to have charity toward God and our dear neighbor. The challenges in today’s polarized society seem to be calling us to new kinds of commitment and outreach in both our prayers and our actions. In the Gospel Jesus insists on heroic love—no resistance to injury, love your enemies, pray for your persecutors. We may not change them, but we change ourselves. Perhaps places of disunity affect us more because of our charism. We know we are called to radical inclusion, to stand in the breach and create unity out of disharmony. Our movement from original sin to original blessing calls us to a compassionate understanding of human nature. Reconciliation is our rudder. We are challenged to stand not for or against—

those are judgmental words. Instead, we stand with. We discover points of contact and try to build bridges.

Our senior members gift us with their wisdom and the example of holy lives well lived. Our newer members challenge us with their generous spirit. The young sisters in Viet Nam inspired us when we saw the video of our leadership's visit several months ago. Here are the words of Ha Tran who recently renewed her vows. "With gratitude to praise our Triune God, I thank God for giving me the gift of my being, to be God's child, and the most significant is that God has called me to live the consecrated life within the Adorers of the Blood of Christ Congregation. This is an opportunity for me to affirm my trust in God's loving providence and God's compassionate presence in my life journey. The ASC Charism and Spirituality is the foundation for me to build on, and the light upon which God's loving providence provides life for my community of ASC ministry in Viet Nam. This grace-filled experience, I am unable to express in words. I thank you and praise God in each moment of my heart's beating. I thank you, my Adorers of the Blood of Christ Congregation. I thank you all who have left their footprints on my life journey of blessings." This is Ha's message to us in her own words, using English as her third language!

I want to give the final expression of ASC spirituality to Jenny Sellaro, originally from Italy, who professed her final vows last year. This is part of her Border Immersion Journal from her experience in El Paso in February with Dani, our JPIC animator and several CPPS Missionaries and Companions.

She writes: "Ruben Garcia is the Mother Teresa of the Border, a person so down to the earth and so rooted in the Gospel. He has been in ministry at the border for over 40 years and is the director of five houses of hospitality." Jenny said he challenged them with these words, "Some people come here or give us resources and pretend to be called heroes, but then return back to their home. I ask you, if you were convinced that knocking at your door is Joseph, Mary and Jesus, would you still say that you have other commitments for today, or that you don't have the infrastructure or the time/energy or find some other excuses? Do you know why you are afraid to help? Because deep inside you all know that God is not going to settle for anything other than all of yourself."

On the day of their departure, Jenny wrote this about the group she was with: "We started as a group that was 'only' connected by the Blood of Christ. Now we are bonded by the time spent together and by the concrete desire to do something and not let Ruben's words be our sad reality as well. A lot that I have shared are not only my words and thoughts but words from our evening prayer, sharing and debriefing. We are unsettled by all we have seen and I hope that these feelings can grow into something very concrete that we do for 'our people.'"

Barbara Jean Franklin, ASC