

I'm not sure how one of us can adequately articulate our charism of the Sisters of the Precious Blood in a way that would represent the whole of us, past and present, much less future. However, what I hope to do today is to put into capsule form some of the influences on our lives that have helped form us into the community that we are now in this first part of the twenty-first century. For those of my Sisters here and who are watching, forgive me my trespasses if what I say does not align with your own articulation of our charism.

Our congregation, the Sisters of the Precious Blood of Dayton, OH, is nearly two centuries old. We were founded by a Swiss wife, mother and widow in 1834 in Castle Loewenberg, Switzerland. For the past two centuries, our Sisters have faithfully tried to fulfill the dream of Mother Maria Anna Brunner and those first women who followed her, who lived lives of prayer and dedication to the Eucharist and to the Precious Blood of Jesus, and who inspired those around them to love God and care for their neighbor

For the past two hundred years, how we have done that has evolved as we have worked, prayed, studied, lived community and served others. In our most recent Constitutions we say: "Today, the redeeming love of Jesus remains our basic inspiration. This Precious Blood spirituality calls us to lives of continual conversion and transformation through daily contemplation of the Word in Scripture and through celebration of the Eucharist."

Two key elements form our lives as Sisters of the Precious Blood: the Eucharist and devotion to the Precious Blood.

## **EUCHARIST**

First, as is appropriate in being faithful to Mother Brunner's inspiration, is the Eucharist. Core to our early founding, right until the late twentieth century, besides daily Mass, Sisters prayed day and night hours of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament in those places where it was possible and especially at our Motherhouse in Dayton where we maintained not only perpetual adoration but also perpetual exposition of the Blessed Sacrament for seventy plus years. The Eucharist, both in the communal liturgical celebration as well as through these hours of adoration over the years, has immersed us deeply in the Paschal Mystery, and in the recognition that the lives we have been given and have tried to live out faithfully, the dying and the death we will pass through and the new life promised us in God have all been modeled for us by Jesus Christ.

Devotion to the Eucharist and immersion in the Paschal Mystery have enabled us to live lives of, at times, considerable change and upheaval. And Eucharist and the contemplation of the Paschal Mystery continue to strengthen us as we recognize that the lives we lived when we were over 800 strong, with a median age somewhere in the fifties, is and will no longer be who we are. The promise of new life in Christ strengthens us as we face our own individual deaths, as well as the realization that at one-tenth of who we were at our peak and with a median age that now hovers around the mid-80s, life will be very different in the next few years. The Paschal Mystery holds out the promise of new life, not only for our transition into eternal life, but also our Congregation's transformation as women, by God's grace, are coming to join us because of our charism, our foundress, our prayer and our ministry.

But we can't avoid the reality that times change and life changes, even in regard to the Eucharist. We no longer have large houses of Sisters, nor our own chapels for Mass and adoration, nor in some cases even the availability of a priest to preside at the Sunday Eucharistic liturgy in a local parish, much less daily Mass in our convents. For us then, we must dig much deeper into the mystery of the Eucharistic Christ, moving away from church and chapel into our personal and communal prayer as well as in the lives of those we minister to and with. Adoration of the Eucharist becomes less an action and more an attitude, one that

approaches all life as sacred and revelatory. We are called to see the face of Christ in those we serve, in those we live with, in those we avoid or ignore, just as surely as we believe that Christ is fully, sacramentally present in the Eucharist to which we present ourselves. Jesus teaches us how to be present to another so that we approach others with a sense of awe at the presence of God within them. We embrace all creation as well which, with us, bows down in adoration and wonder at God's goodness and greatness exposed in its very being and becoming.

The word Eucharist means thanksgiving and thanksgiving is an intrinsic component of adoration. In making ourselves fully present to God, we recognize that we would have nothing, would be nothing, were it not for God's initiative and God's goodness. At that point we can only sincerely pour out our gratitude in wordless awe. Silent and reverent thanksgiving seems the only appropriate response to the immensity of God's love and the gift of both the sacrament of the Eucharist and the sacramental presence of God in others.

## **PRECIOUS BLOOD**

Turning to devotion to the Precious Blood, we see that even before Mother Brunner made pilgrimage to Rome and came into contact with the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, she found in the crucifix a focus for prayer and inspiration. Prominent over the years in all of our houses has been a crucifix which you would find in most every room. The various depictions of the death of Jesus and the shedding of his blood keep before us the reminder that our lives are meant to be given away in service to others just as Jesus gave his life and death away out of love for us.

Our early devotional prayers honoring the Precious Blood focused on the pain and agony of blood-shedding, all done as reparation for our sins and the sins of the world. We felt called to unite our actions and our sacrifices with Jesus in his Passion and death which were seen as a requirement by the Father in atonement for our sins. Today, as Sisters of the Precious Blood, we see the self-giving of Jesus not only in the sacrifice of himself on the cross, but also the

sacrifice of himself in the dangerous words he spoke, the healings he performed, the forgiveness he offered, the communion he both called others to and created with them. We come to understand that we are called to do the same.

Two simple illustrations in our congregation of how this giving of self should be present in our lives. The first is the small crucifix from Castle Loewenberg where Mother Brunner spent her last years, and that is reputed to be one that Mother herself prayed before. It is handed on to each new Major Superior of the community at her installation. This is a visual and tactile reminder of her role in living a life of self-giving through servant leadership, compassion and compelling love. In addition, in the past, on entering the novitiate, each new Sister was given a silver crucifix on a red cord to wear, and now is given our cross insignia as a declaration of who we are and Whose we are.

## **REDEMPTION**

Theology, it is said, is faith seeking understanding. Theologians are those who help articulate what we cannot really know. Serious theologians will sometimes express their helplessness in putting into words what is essentially unknowable, like St. Thomas Aquinas who declared that all he had written was like straw in the wind, or Karl Rahner who described God as an Inexhaustible Mystery. No one can capture who God is; yet we try.

Ten centuries ago, a theologian wrote a treatise exploring the concept of redemption as God's desire that Jesus die a painful, sacrificial death to make up for or atone for the sins of all humanity past and future. St. Anselm of Canterbury's explanation caught the imagination of people with the drama of a sacrificial victim, a Paschal Lamb, standing in for us, to redeem us from well-deserved punishment for our sins. He speaks of God then raising Jesus to show that this final, once and for all sacrifice, has fulfilled God's desire for justice. For the next nine hundred years this was the common understanding of redemption preached in the church, even though it seemed in direct contrast to the love, mercy and forgiveness of God expressed

over and over in the words of scripture, especially the prophets, and lived out in the life of Jesus.

Eventually the concept of the God of compassion and mercy who calls us back again and again when we turn away, again and again, emerged as a more faithful understanding of redemption. God desires, not sacrifice or punishment, but rather love and mercy to win us back when we stray. Redemption is not bought by Jesus's or our suffering; rather it is given freely whenever we have broken our relationship with God and return, our spirits open to receiving love and forgiveness.

Meditation on the Word of God, especially the Gospels and the life and words of Jesus, opens up for us an understanding of the mercy of God and the self-giving love lived by Jesus. When as Sisters of the Precious Blood we speak of the redeeming love of Jesus as our basic inspiration, we celebrate the merciful love of God who is always ready to welcome us back to union. This prompts us, who are made in the image and likeness of God, to be forgiving and merciful to all around us, both those with whom we are in the covenant of our vows in living community, as well as all those we come into contact with in our ministry and service to others. We strive not to judge others, not to ignore them, not to avoid them, not to put them outside the walls. In a sense, we try to live as though God were saying to us: "Your job is just to love them; I'll sort them out later." Would that we could, daily, always and in all ways. But when we cannot, we can rely on God's loving forgiveness and mercy.

## **CHARISM**

If before the Second Vatican Council, you had asked one of us what our congregation's charism was, we would probably have looked at you rather blankly. It wasn't until that Council that the word charism was used in relation to the founding of religious communities. Charism is the word used to describe the gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit for the good of the Church and God's people. In the case of consecrated life, it is the gift that the foundress or founder was

called to put into action. In other words, it was the founding dream, desire, myth of the founder which energized him or her to give themselves and their followers totally to God and others through consecrated life for that particular purpose.

After the Second Vatican Council, the Council Fathers asked Congregations to return to the intent of the founder or foundress, to look at how the congregation had evolved, and to assess the signs of the times and how the present congregation was being faithful to that founding charism. The Council Fathers could hardly have imagined what the Holy Spirit would let loose as congregations responded to that mandate. Many Congregations found that in looking at the founder or foundress, in exploring their history, in prayerfully considering what that original gift might look like in the 1960s or 70s or now, they sensed the urging of the Spirit to move away particularly from those ministries that had been put on them by others, especially Bishops, when they moved into their dioceses, and to discover the contemporary interpretation of what their charism compelled them to be doing.

Unlike some congregations whose charism is a work, like mercy, charity, preaching, care of the elderly, poverty and care of creation, our Sisters realized that our charism was not really education, not being teachers as most of us were, but rather it was a spirituality that informed and motivated diverse actions and service. It was the spirituality of the Precious Blood, something that seemed much more difficult to define and to understand how it was to be lived out in ministry. I'll say a bit more about this later.

## **RECONCILIATION**

With the Second Vatican Council, there was a resurgence of theologians exploring many aspects of understanding our faith. Among those aspects was revisiting how a charism of Precious Blood spirituality looked today. Moving beyond the theology of atonement proposed by St. Anselm to the words of Scripture, the gift of the Precious Blood grew and expanded in our understanding. From the work of our brothers, the Missionaries, the aspect of reconciliation

began to creep into our vocabulary as well, painting a newer, fuller and more applicable picture of Precious Blood spirituality. The early works of Fathers Bob Schreiter and Barry Fisher were read, discussed and at times appropriated in our own writings. The cry of the blood shed by those suffering from the greed, violence, or indifference of others, and the call of the Precious Blood to be there, to stand with, to offer healing and consolation are certainly necessary in the world today, a world all too often fractured and torn apart with people set at odds with each other. This resonated with us as we reclaimed our founding charism, and, to some degree, fit our own sense of who we were and were becoming.

## **AS WOMEN**

But as much as it fit, it seemed that something was missing for us. We began to realize that as women, we have a somewhat different relationship with blood. For us, blood is shed not only in violence and death, it is also shed both in preparation for new life and in bringing that new life into the world. When acknowledging this aspect of our reality as women, it seemed to serve as both counterpoint to and complementary of the men's view of Precious Blood spirituality. We felt called not only to stand with people who were suffering, whose blood was being shed in violence, but also to work to ensure that the injustice that caused that suffering wouldn't happen, to foster and nourish new life where it was emerging. We are meant to be life-giving and to give our lives to nourish life: spiritually, psychologically, emotionally and physically.

The question for us that would ensure we lived out the mission that flowed from our charism was now not "what works would we do or what corporate ministries might we establish?" Rather it became "How am I, or how can I be a life-giving, reconciling presence in whatever ministry God is calling me to?" Our understanding of our charism as a spirituality opened for us greater diversity in ministry and also greater unity in inspiration.

Mother Brunner's inspiration, from her prayer before the Blessed Sacrament and her devotion to the Precious Blood, spilled over into her care of not only her own children, but also as Godmother for over 40 children in her area. As well, her generosity to the poor was legendary. Even today, after 225 years, she is remembered by the people from Mumliswill and Ramiswill, Switzerland as the Pious Mother and some long for her canonization. We were now continuing to follow in her footsteps more authentically.

After coming to the United States, we Sisters became primarily a teaching community as a result of responding to Bishops' invitations to work in Catholic schools in their dioceses. Because of the mandate by the Bishops at the Second Vatican Council, we finally reclaimed our founding charism of Precious Blood spirituality and began to explore living it out not only as educators, but also as pastoral ministers and administrators, as missionaries in Chile and Guatemala, in social work, retreat work, spiritual direction, work in diocesan administration, campus ministry, healthcare, hospital chaplaincy and more. As the works multiplied, we were careful to keep the question always before us: How in what I am doing am I living out our Precious Blood spirituality? How am I being a life-giving, reconciling presence in my life and my ministry?

## **REAL TIME**

So what about now when most of us are longer in ministries out with and among God's people because of age, infirmity, fragility? Can we still live out our charism? The answer to that is "now as much as ever". I've been intrigued with theologian Father Ron Rolheiser's reflections on our call to fidelity in our aging. He speaks of our having given our lives away in service and ministry until it comes the time when we must give our dying and our deaths away – like Jesus did. In the last chapter of John's Gospel when Jesus is gathered with his disciples on the seashore, and after he has elicited from Peter his declaration of love and given him his ministry of feeding the lambs and sheep, Jesus says to him: Amen, amen I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will



stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and will lead you where you do not want to go...(then he said) Follow me.”

Unlike the poet Dylan Thomas who writes:

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Father Rolheiser urges us to contemplate on how can give our deaths away. Jesus allowed himself to let others lead him to his death without resistance, to do to him both what he could not do for himself as well as what he would not have wanted done to him. We are called to give our deaths away in a similar fashion: with grace and equanimity and love, like Jesus.

Jesus did not give physical birth to a human child, but in blood and water on the cross, he birthed a revolutionary movement which became our church. This church was confirmed when the Holy Spirit breathed a courageous new life into its people after Jesus returned to his Father. Jesus' Precious Blood calls out to us as Sisters of the Precious Blood to continue to receive and act in this outpouring of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit's power continues in us yet today when it might seem like we have little left to give. Taking our inspiration from Jesus, though, we can birth new life. This is especially true as we accept and discern with those women who come to us, who are hearing God's call to give their lives in service and ministry to God's people with us, and who desire to become one of us. Our lives are rich with the experiences we have had, with the ever-deepening knowledge of the Spirit's movement among us. With confidence, we can share our living, our dying and our death with them hopefully modeling for them what Jesus modeled for us.

Our charism does not stop with our ability to be in active ministry. Our spirits are the size of God's world. Today those of us who are limited in what we can do are called nonetheless to be aware of the needs of God's people around the world and to give our death away and to birth

new life in those who request our prayers and who experience strength and courage through the Holy Spirit. We give our death away and birth new life in awareness of and prayer for those who leave home and homeland to seek safety and a better life, for those who do not have what they need to raise their children to be healthy and happy, for those who are oppressed as well as those who are the oppressors. We give our death away and birth new life when we accept graciously those who do for us what we can no longer do for ourselves, those who provide us with nourishing food or who clean our rooms when we cannot, the receptionist at the doctor's office or the nurse who attends us in the hospital, our family and friends who come to visit and keep connections alive, our Sisters who share our joys and our struggles.

Before Jesus shed his blood on the cross, he gathered his community and promised that his gift of self was not confined to his physical body. Taking bread and wine, he encouraged them to gather in his name, to remember him and his words, to eat and drink, and to become not what, but who, they had just ingested. What we call Eucharist is Jesus' desire that each of us would love courageously and totally because we believe that he is one with us and we are one in him. In our personal and communal prayer, a sense of adoration leads us directly back to the gift of self of Jesus in the Eucharist. And in turn, we Sisters of the Precious Blood are missioned and urged by the redeeming love of Jesus the Christ and rooted in Eucharistic prayer we proclaim God's love by being a life-giving, reconciling presence in our fractured world.