

Drawing All Peoples Near in the Blood of Christ

A brash young man who had read Thomas Merton's Seven Story Mountain visited Gethsemane for the first time. He asked Merton, "What is a smart fellow like you doing in a place like this?"

Merton replied, "I am here because I believe in prayer. That is my vocation."

For Saint Gaspar del Bufalo, his vocation was to proclaim the Precious Blood of Jesus.

A brief review of the life of the founder of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood affords an entry into understanding Precious Blood spirituality and how we live that spirituality today.

Born on January 6, 1786, Gaspar was ordained to the priesthood at the age of 22 on July 31, 1808. In the Spring after his ordination, Napoleon suppressed the Papal States. On June 13, 1810, Gaspar was brought before the civil authorities to take an oath of allegiance to the emperor. With words that resound and echo through the centuries in the hearts of all missionaries of the Precious Blood, Gaspar said, "I would rather die or suffer evil than take such an oath. I cannot. I must not. I will not."

It was during this four-year exile that Gaspar's devotion to the Precious Blood of Jesus deepened and ripened within his heart. It was through his wounds, his vulnerability, his imprisonment, that Gaspar heard the blood of Christ crying out to him. His mentor and spiritual director, Father Francesco Albertini, who inspired and encouraged him to embrace the spirituality of the blood of Christ.

Napoleon was defeated in January 1814, and Gaspar returned to Rome. He felt a call to join the Jesuits like his hero, St. Francis Xavier, and to be a missionary in the world. Instead, Pope Pius VII invited him to renew and reform the people of Rome, especially the local clergy who had sold out to Napoleon. Thus began his mission of evangelization, the proclamation of the Word, proclaiming renewal and reconciliation through the blood of Christ.

Gaspar was 29 years old when he founded the Missionaries of the Most Precious Blood on August 15, 1815.

During the pilgrimage to Rome for the 200th anniversary of the founder of the Congregation in 2015, we visited the church of Santa Maria near the Trevi Fountain where Gaspar is buried. One of the Companions took a picture of me praying at the tomb of St. Gaspar. I keep that picture in my office because it reminds me of the unscheduled visit to the church that Pope John XXIII made on Friday, January 4, 1963.

In his diary for that day, good Pope John expresses his admiration of St. Gaspar: "I love him much, because he was a priest of Rome and canon of St. Mark's, my parish church when I was living in Rome. I invited him to be the first of the saints of Rome to lift up his voice for the Vatican Council."

Saint Gaspar was a champion of the renewal of the Church in his day. Of course, there is no greater champion of the renewal of the Church in the last century than Pope St. John XXIII who set in motion Vatican II. For the past decade of his papacy, Pope Francis has sought to reclaim the vision of Vatican II.

Reclaiming the Vision

The Second Vatican Council encouraged religious communities to return to their sources and reclaim the core values upon which the congregations were founded. The challenge was to tap the initial inspiration of our founders and apply that spirit to the signs of these times.

St. Gaspar defined our role as missionaries as two-fold: the renewal of the church through the preaching of the Word and the reconciliation of the world through the Blood of Christ. These key values—renewal and reconciliation—are the lens through which precious blood people see the world. They provide the perspective to view the issues that challenge the church and the world today. When we look through the lens of our charism and spirituality, the world looks different. I'll reflect on this more in the homily as we hear the story of the man born blind.

There are many stories about Gaspar's life that have influenced and informed the way I view certain issues in the church and the world. For example, when I felt called to participate in acts of civil disobedience against the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the 1980s, Gaspar's refusal to take the oath of allegiance to Napoleon was an inspiration.

Though he dreamed of being a missionary like the great St. Francis Xavier to whom he was greatly devoted, his fragile health would not allow it. So drawing upon his own experiences of illness, incarceration and exile, he spent his life visiting the sick, ministering with the poor, setting up shelters for the homeless, and seeking out those on the margins of the church and society as a minister of reconciliation.

While he is known in Rome—as evidenced by good Pope St. John XXIII's affection for Gaspar—he is not well-known in the United States. When giving a retreat a few years ago, I met a woman religious who grew up in a parish served by members of my community in the early 1950s. She mentioned she had fond memories of the Precious Blood missionaries. "The priests wore cassocks with a large cross with a gold chain and they told us stories of Blessed Caspar," she said. I told her she remembered the cross and chain correctly but Caspar was a friendly ghost and our founder's name was Gaspar.

"Yes, that's right," she smiled. "Blessed Gaspar—have they made him a saint yet?"

Gaspar was canonized by Pope Pius XII on June 12, 1954. On the 50th anniversary of his canonization in 2004, I had the privilege to offer a retreat at the Monastery of San Felice in Giano in the region of Umbria in Italy. It was here that Gaspar founded the Congregation in 1815. As missionaries from around the world journeyed together in the footsteps of our founder, it was clear how his passion to draw all people near in the blood of Christ continues to be our pulse as we promote the renewal of the church and seek to be ministers of reconciliation for a wounded and war-scarred world.

What Would Gaspar Do?

As we discern our mission today, remembering Gaspar's original inspiration is key. Living the charism of Gaspar doesn't mean we do what Gaspar did at his time in history. Rather, it means doing what Gaspar would do if he were alive today. So, what would Gaspar do?

He would likely look at the violence and terrorism in the world and send missionaries to those places torn by war and violence to be peacemakers and reconcilers; to attend to the wounds of the victims—as our Precious Blood missionaries have done in Poland as they welcomed refugees from the war in Ukraine. Gaspar would also seek to change the hearts of the oppressors and purveyors of violence.

The recent immersion experience at the border to learn and give witness to our broken immigration system that members and lay associates of several of our congregations participated in would make all of our founders pleased. Welcoming those seeking shelter from persecution, refugees and asylum seekers is a mission and ministry marked with the fingerprints of precious blood spirituality.

Gaspar would seek dialogue with those inside the church where there is polarization, misunderstanding, privilege or pomposity.

He would seek to renew the church and society by establishing mission houses on the margins, on the borders, on the edges where the chasms in society exist. He would establish safe places where dialogue and reconciliation could restore relationship. And he would utilize the means available today to proclaim the Word of God, to communicate the message of reconciliation and renewal in the blood of Christ.

Establishing mission houses on the margins where our members and lay associates engage in a ministry of reconciliation, renewal, and restorative justice is at the heart of this vision as we seek “to draw all peoples near through the blood of the cross.”

A New Covenant

The essence of Precious Blood spirituality is captured in the Letter to the Hebrews: “Jesus, mediator of a new covenant...the sprinkled Blood that speaks more eloquently than that of Abel.” Jesus is identified as the mediator of a new covenant, implying relationship and reconciliation.

What does it mean to be a “mediator of a new covenant?” When we started the reconciliation center in Chicago two decades ago, we took mediation training from Northwestern University. Though the focus was more on corporate mediation rather than personal, being a mediator implies someone who is willing to stand in the breach between two opposing points of view. A mediator in a labor dispute tries to get the two sides to reach an agreement.

As mediator of a new covenant, Jesus enters the relationship not with the blood of lambs and goats but with his own blood. He becomes vulnerable which means, as Bob Schreiter wrote in The Ministry of Reconciliation, “the ability to be wounded.” Schreiter believed vulnerability is essential in the work of reconciliation because it is “a kind of self-giving in love that makes possible coming to a new place, a new state of existence.” Being vulnerable is the “capacity to trust that one runs the risk of wounds.”

Since my early days of formation, we have been told to be a missionary of the Precious Blood means to enter fully the paschal mystery. So, the vocation poster should read: “Come, suffer with us!” But as Bob Schreiter pointed out, “Vulnerability does not make wounds desirable, nor does it make them less painful. One is willing to run the risk of wounds because of something important: the communion of love that engenders trust, that makes the fresh start of forgiveness possible.”

In his person, Jesus is the one who reconciles humanity to God. In his blood, Jesus infuses the world with energy and life. This Precious Blood transfusion reflects a new quality of relationship that God has with us, building upon the first covenant God made with our ancestors in faith when the prophet captured the relationship as “I will be your God and you will be my people.” In Jesus, this first covenant, damaged by sin and broken by betrayal, is now restored.

This restoration makes the relationship new. The “sprinkled Blood” is now “poured out, rushing, and gushing from the side of Jesus on the cross to create a river of mercy, a stream of redemption. When one looks at this pool of blood, one sees the reflection of God’s very self. This is not a stagnant pool but a flowing stream that flows from the cross and travels to the far corners of the earth.

This blood “speaks more eloquently than that of Abel” which also cried out from the ground to name the violence and claim the injustice, because this blood of Christ cries out for reconciliation, forgiveness, mercy, and peace. The eloquence of blood is found in its language of forgiveness, its cadence of compassion, its rhythm of redemption. This blood is more eloquent because it is poetic and passionate and speaks for an entire human race.

Abel's blood cried murder and violence that was done to him by his brother. Every murder victim's blood, every victim of violence or terror, shouts to the heavens and screams for vengeance. We see it all the time in the world as the eyes of so many are blinded by revenge and retribution. It seems that blood that shouts for vengeance drowns out the eloquent calls for peace and reconciliation.

Place your ear to the ground and listen for the blood sighing, crying out for peace, for justice, for reconciliation. There is so much bloodshed today. The world is awash in blood. How do we stem the tsunami of terror in our world, the spin cycle of violence that accelerates the carnage?

The blood of Christ with its poetic passion must flood the world in a show of force—a force of tender compassion and understanding that breaks the cycle of violence with circles of listening, truth, healing and hope.

Last Tuesday in Chicago, I had the opportunity to meet for a day of prayer with the staff of our Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation in Chicago. What began with four of us twenty years ago has grown to over thirty of the most remarkable people one can ever meet. Listening to their stories, witnessing how they establish safe space as they accompany victims of violence, mentor young people, practice restorative justice, and welcome those hungry for healing, for communion, offered great hope and encouragement that the vision has its time and will be fulfilled not only on the southside of Chicago but wherever Precious Blood people live our spirituality.

Outside the Gate

In The Passion and the Cross, Father Ronald Rolheiser tells a story about a woman who “admitted that she couldn't really explain what the cross of Jesus meant to her but said that she had a sense of its meaning.” When this woman was a young girl, her mother was murdered. “When she saw the blood-soaked mattress and her mother's bloody handprint on the wall,” Rolheiser writes, “she, right inside the horror and pain of the moment, knew in her gut, without being able to put words to it, that there was a deep and sacred connection between her mother's story (and her blood on that mattress) and Jesus's story (and his blood on the cross).”

We have witnessed so much bloodshed, so much death because of violence, so much loss due to fires and floods, hurricanes and horrors that terrorize the soul, and so much hurt and suffering caused by the scandal of sexual abuse and abuse of power in the church. The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that “Jesus also suffered outside the gate, to consecrate the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp, bearing the reproach that he bore.”

As people who claim the spirituality of the blood of Christ poured out on the cross, we stand with the victims of violence in our world. Are we willing to go “outside the gates” where the blood-stained cross stands and to be brave and bold enough in our commitment and our cause to be an inclusive and compassionate communion created and sustained by the blood of Christ?

“Sometimes the heart intuits where the head needs to go,” Father Rolheiser writes. For people sent by the blood, we belong “outside the camp.” But we can't go there unless, like the woman in Rolheiser's story, we have made this sacred connection: “In her deepest center she intuited the connection between her mother's blood and Jesus's blood,” Rolheiser writes, “even though she couldn't articulate that connection in words. In street parlance, ‘she got it,’ without precisely understanding it.”

Precious Blood people seek to live a spirituality of reconciliation. One of the stories from our St. Gaspar's life that continues to inspire is about Sonnino where bandits were terrorizing the people. The town was going to be destroyed by the government, but Gaspar knew there had to be another way. Gaspar proposed a process of evangelization instead of destruction.

Gaspar's mission was deceptively simple. It was a ministry of presence. The missionaries moved to the places where violence reigned and established "safe houses." In these safe houses, renewal and reconciliation were rooted in the ministry of the Word.

Gaspar confronted the reality of violence by being in solidarity with the victims. But he also recognized in those who perpetrated the violence the image of God that had become so damaged and demeaned by desperation, poverty, and hunger. Armed only with the cross, Gaspar sought to be a blood-stained bridge of hope and reconciliation.

During our Bicentennial in 2015, I wrote this prayer as we seek to stand in the chasms today and find the courage to go outside the camp:

God of all Creation,
we give you thanks for the prophetic and saving action of your Son,
Jesus Christ, in whose blood we are brought close to your heart.

Your servant, Gaspar del Bufalo,
allowed the Word of peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation
to become a living fire, imprisoned in his bones,
causing his blood to boil until the soil on which he stood
was saturated with the blood of Christ.

Your Spirit penetrated Gaspar's heart
and gave him the courage to go outside the gate,
to stand at the foot of the cross.

Your Spirit ignited within him
a desire to speak the truth
and to bring your love, justice, and mercy
to the very ends of the earth.

As Gaspar fearlessly proclaimed your Word
and passionately gave witness to its saving power,
give us the courage to go outside the camp
as we seek to live Your inclusive covenant of love.

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