

## ***Building Community in the Blood of the Covenant***

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### Introduction

In my visit to Poland in November of 1993 I would ask our young aspirants and seminarians what it was that brought them to the C.P.P.S. Almost without variation, the answer I received was "the search for community life"!

In a very different setting, during our Cincinnati Assembly of 1993, we formed in groups during the Assembly and were asked to draw up a list of priorities in our lives, indicating what it was we considered most important to us. To the surprise of many of us there, "community life" turned out to be the first or second choice of all the groups!

Surely the emergence of community life as an important element in the dreams and visions we have as we enter and live in our Congregations is a fact to be weighed today. In a world fragmented and torn apart, immersed in individualism and competition, once again people are once again searching for community to break out of their isolation and loneliness.

In our last meeting of Superiors General in Rome in May of this year, this observation was confirmed by comments made by numerous Generals when speaking of their Congregations. I think we can safely affirm that in the dreams and visions of many young men and women who enter religious life today and who join our ranks as young Adorers or Missionaries, lies the desire to live meaningful relationships in community.

### **Rooted in the Blood of the Covenant**

Where do we root our commitment to community? Where do we draw our strength from to live in community? As Adorers and Missionaries of the Blood of Christ, we go to our own well, to drink from the springs of the Spirituality of the Precious Blood. One of the most significant concepts of all of Scriptures and fundamental in our understanding of the spirituality of the Precious Blood, is that of the **Covenant**.

Let us recall what happened to God's People after they were freed from slavery and wandered through the deserts.

**Exodus 24, 1-11:** the Covenant. God shared his life with the people, promising to be their God and they would be his people, if they observed his laws.

In this text which is key to our understanding of the Spirituality of the Precious Blood, it was **BLOOD** which played an essential role. It was the **BLOOD** sprinkled on the Altar and on the people which sealed the Covenant, making of the group of slaves, a new people,

the People of God. The Blood which symbolized **LIFE** was sprinkled on the Altar (God) and on the People, thus bringing about the union of both.

This was the key experience which formed the israelites into a people. They were called to community. The experience of Exodus and of the Covenant were experiences which would continually be renewed by the People of Israel throughout their history and to this day. And we can also use the concept of the liberating experience of Exodus and the experience of Covenant as keys to the interpretation of all the Scriptures.

### **The Blood of the New Covenant**

It was in the context of a Memorial Meal in which Jesus gathered to remember with his apostles the saving events of that first Exodus Night, that Jesus taking a Cup of Wine, passed it around to share with his apostles, inviting them to be part of the **New Covenant**, sealed this time *in his own Blood offered for all!*

**"In the same way he took the cup after supper, and said, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me'."**  
**1 Corinthians 11, 26**

For the apostles that night, and for us, every time we share the Eucharistic Cup, we are receiving the very life-blood of God, drawing us into His life of communion, plunging us into the Trinitarian Being of God. One with God, we are called to be one with one another! In the New Covenant we are called to respond by living the LAW OF LOVE. This is how we will be recognized as women and men of the New Covenant: if we love one another, as Christ has loved us!

As Covenant People, we are also called to be builders of community, willing even to die so that God's Project for all peoples might be realized. So that we all might live in communion with one another which was God's Plan before sin entered the picture and spoiled it. Jesus died because He lived and preached and furthered that Dream and He outstretched his arms on the Cross, spilling His Precious Blood, so as to draw all peoples unto Himself, into one great family. We also, as we share the Blood of the Eucharistic Cup, pledge to put forth our best efforts to building that Communion and we express our willingness to die as Christ did if necessary to make it a reality!

### **Living Covenant in Community**

Now let us look at how we are called to live community in our daily lives. We are men and women of the New Covenant.

At the heart of Gaspar's "dream" was community life. He considered it a fundamental ingredient of his Insitute. Our Normative Texts (C1) remind us of this when they say: "living in community...in the bond of charity". It is also an element which is very much present in our General Formation Program as well as in the Prophile of the C.P.P.S.

Missionary. We must rediscover and value this aspect of our life as Missionaries of the Precious Blood. The dream of Gaspar is now in our hands. How are we living and witnessing to this dimension of our calling?

The Constitutions of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ underline the value of community life, and even structure their Constitutions around the three building blocks:

- 1) The Community of Consecrated Love;
- 2) The Community of Adoring and Redeeming Love; and
- 3) The Community of Faithful Love.

In this second conference, I would like to reflect with you on what it means to live in community in light of the Blood of the Covenant. We are speaking of living in the love of God, since the Blood of the Covenant is a Covenant signed in Christ's Blood and which draws us into the very life of God. It is God's love which we profess and which binds us to one another.

This characteristic of the pursuit of perfection in charity is present in the "dream" both of María de Matthias and of Gaspar del Bufalo.

***"If we remain humbly open and pray with confidence, the Spirit of God who worked powerfully in the heart of Maria De Mattias will continue to pour into our hearts the fullness of charity. The spirit of our congregation will thus be all love and charity - 'charity toward God and toward our dear neighbor.' Our congregation will then become an ever more credible witness of God's tender love, of which the blood of Jesus is vibrant sign and unending covenant pledge."***

***(ASC Constitutions, #2)***

***"St. Gaspar del Bufalo founded a clerical Institute. He associated to himself a group of priests...uniting them only with the bond of charity, instead of the vows. Living in community in Mission Houses, it was a source of continued renovation for the priests and for the people..."***

***(CPPS Constitutions, #1)***

Gaspar as well as María de Matthias conceived of charity as the unifying force of their communities. It is evident from the above-cited texts. This element of community is also present in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and in the new Code of Canon Law. From this bond of charity a strong apostolic dynamism is born.

How do we live these elements in an apostolic community? What is the *witness* which we give of our community life? I would like to underline now some of the aspects of our

common life which are part of our **prophetic witness** in the world today. I consider these aspects as essential ingredients and they constitute our "*first apostolate*".

## COMMUNITY AS A HAVEN OF DIALOGUE

The Document of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life, entitled "***Fraternal Life in Community***", published in Rome in 1994, speaks of the importance of communication in community living:

***"In the process of renewal in recent years, communication appears as one of the human factors which requires increasing relevance for the life of the religious community. The deepest felt need to increment fraternal life of a community demands the corresponding necessity of a more extensive and more intense communication." (#29)***

Community is the place for honest communication in an environment of confidence and of mutual respect. The Adorers in their Constitutions express very nicely this element of community living:

***"The Lord asks each of us to contribute with responsibility to the building up of a genuine community of faith. We will live together as sisters and friends, and, loving one another as Christ has loved us, we will accept one another in our diversity and we will communicate with one another in honesty, delicacy and respect. With an attentive heart, we will lend attention to the other and we will respond with love to that which is communicated to us." (#7)***

And so, dialogue and communication are proposed as a normal means and instrument of building community.

### ***Sharing our Dreams***

Community should be the place where we share our dreams. The dream of Jesus, of Gaspar and of Maria de Mattias are now in our weak and fragile hands. We are called to remain faithful to those dreams (Vision-Mission) and to incarnate them today in the cultures and in the social contexts in which we exercise our ministry. We are called to be faithful to that dream and to never abandon it, regardless of our tiredness and our weakness. In community dialogue ***we keep those dreams alive*** in one another and in community. At times we will be called to "wake one another up" from our sloth, from our laziness, from our indifference, in order to once again ***make our hearts burn*** with the energies which those dreams can generate. We can be rejuvenated! We can once again bear fruits! We are never too old!

When St. Gaspar was in prison in Piacenza along with Francesco Albertini, he fell gravely ill and they feared for his life. Albertini looked after him and kept vigil. At that time, Albertini remembered a prophecy that had been revealed to him years before by a saintly religious woman, Sister Agnes of the Incarnate Word. She had a vision in which a young priest, devoted to the Precious Blood and to St. Frances Xavier, would found a new Congregation of Missionaries. Albertini then saw in Gaspar that person and decided to reveal to Gaspar the dream, precisely in those moments of his serious illness. Gaspar began to recuperate his strengths and got well. In a sense, "having shared the dream with him", had awakened him to new life!

Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24, 13-35), met up with two sad and disillusioned disciples who had seen the dream that Jesus had awakened in them, die. All now seemed disillusion and frustration. Everything was lost. Walking with them, and sharing with them the Sacred Scriptures "their hearts burned within them", and their dream was rekindled. Once again, they were alive!

Sometimes there are too many "prophets of doom" among us, who only can see that our numbers are shrinking, or that we have to close our Institutions. They are the ones who don't let us dream and see visions and who always put the note of pessimism and scepticism in the discussion of whatever new project or proposal comes forth. They are the "doubting Thomases" of the modern world, the party-poopers, who are not capable of seeing new possibilities for the community, for the people, or for the world for that matter. They are those who act like the brothers of Joseph in the Old Testament who plan "to kill the dreamer" (Genesis, 37).

On the contrary, community should be a space in which we can share our deepest dreams, those dreams which will give meaning to our lives and call forth a sense of identity. In Community our dreams are strengthened, clarified and interpreted. It is in the sharing of our stories and traditions and in passing them on from one generation to another that we grow together as a group and we are reaffirmed once and again in who we are and in what values we share. It is about keeping alive our "historical memory", recalling with respect and gratitude the dreamers of yesteryears. At the Eucharistic Table, those dreams are evoked and shared.

Some years ago, while participating in a Spirituality Workshop with the Brazilian Vicariate, a day was dedicated to recreation and time at the beach. But on the way to the beach we stopped at the cemetery to visit the graves of fellow C.P.P.S. members who had died while in service in the Vicariate. I was deeply impressed with the moment, as each of the members shared their memories of their brothers, as we stood around their graves. It became a beautiful moment of thanksgiving.

This motivated me to do something similar in the Central American Mission on the anniversary of the death of Fr. Bill Frantz, one of our missionaries. All the members from Guatemala City gathered and together we went to the local cemetery of Santa Rosita in

order to remember our history and to celebrate those who had gone before us in mission. We also invited the lay people of the parish, who likewise shared their memories and stories of him and of his ministry among them. We discovered that this was a very effective way of connecting with our past and of keeping alive our history (read Sirac 44, 1. 10-15).

In the Cincinnati Provincial Assembly of May, 1992, several of our members were invited to share with the members gathered in Assembly our dreams and our vision for the Congregation. It was a new experience for the Province which turned out to be very beautiful and inspiring. It was a source of life and of hope for the membership and it awoke in others the desire to share their dreams.

The Pacific Province, in turn, is engaged in a process of "dreaming the future". The members have been invited to "dream" the Congregation of the future, as they would like it. It is a way of becoming united around a common search. They call the experience: "Vision, 2,010".

To be able to dialogue on this level in a meaningful way, it is necessary to live our "bond of charity", which expresses itself in a deep respect for one another. The "bond of charity" is the atmosphere which makes it all possible. Without this atmosphere, we will never be able to share on a deeper level and our "dialogue" will be restricted to talking about the weather, sports, or other issues "out there", outside of our selves. Honest, frank, and open dialogue, which is done with and in the bond of charity, is an important way of living the covenant-relationship which the Blood of Christ calls us to in Community.

Our Normative Texts mention dialogue, based in trust and in mutual respect, as the NORMAL method and instrument of community growth (#20). In community dialogue we affirm and accept the gift of God given to community by the prophets among us and in that dialogue we can test the vision. This type of community dialogue cannot be restricted only to a yearly Assembly. It will not be enough. It should become a part of our daily life in common as brothers and sisters. As Congregations which strive to incarnate the dreams and visions of our founder and foundress, we must learn to read the signs of the times in our community dialogue and we discover in those dreams the call to incarnate our charism and our spirituality in a permanent dynamics.

We share this dialogue with our incorporated members, with our candidates for Incorporation, and with our companions and associates. The communitarian animation of our superiors and directors is called upon to propose and to stimulate this type of dialogue and to animate "the young to see visions and the old ones to dream!" We all are in need of words of stimulus and of challenge which impells us to evangelize in far-off and difficult places, as well as in those places where we habitually exercise our apostolates in our daily lives.

In this process it is surely necessary and important to recognize the losses of membership and the diminution of our numbers and the closing of some of our institutions which were monuments to the success of our mission in the past. Without recognizing and

assuming those losses and the pain they entail, as part of our living of the Paschal Mystery, we will never be able to be open to the new and we will not be able to dream a future for our Congregations. For it is around a common vision, assumed and shared by all, that the community rallies and projects herself.

### ***In an Apostolic Dialogue***

A great deal of our everyday dialogue in community evolves around the planning of schedules and of activities. But we are called to go deeper. Our life in community should afford us with the opportunity and the space in which we can share our community projects, our successes and our failures. It is the place where we can question one another and where we can discern together. It is the place where we reflect upon our missionary charism and the spirituality of the Blood of Jesus.

At times, our apostolic dialogue can turn to *fraternal correction* in a spirit of loving concern. In community we can recognize with humility and truth our faults and our fragileness, our errors and our struggles as well as our efforts to overcome them. It is necessary, however, that this dialogue be opportune, respecting the rhythm of the others. Our fraternal life in common strives to create an ambience in which sisters and brothers are called to healing, leaving behind the road of evil and of death, in order to take up a journey which leads to a *fuller life*. Once again, the Adorers describe very well this aspect in their Constitutions:

***"Together we seek a clearer apostolic vision through sharing information, insights and discernment. By our understanding and encouragement we support each other in facing the challenges of ministry." (#9)***

This way of conceiving community life is far distant from that of a community which simply doles out ministerial responsibilities and then each one goes their one way.

Apostolic dialogue calls us to create an atmosphere of genuine concern in which we share with the others our ministries. In a world which reekes of competition, we are called to be *communities*, in which the gifts and talents of the others are celebrated, and in which we stimulate each other to growth and in which we are mutually enriched with the special gifts which each of us brings to the Community.

Community is the place in which we can help one another to discern and to serve as ***people of the Blood***. We should answer this question: "What does the spirituality of the Precious Blood call us to in our apostolic commitments?"

### **COMMUNITY AS A PLACE OF HOSPITALITY**

The hospitality which is mentioned in our Normative Texts, #C 12, is one of the characteristics of our community throughout the world. We are usually good hosts and we make our visitors feel "at home" among us. While this is very important and commendable, we must also reflect for a moment on another expression of hospitality which goes even deeper and which can be described as "breaking and sharing bread in the Eucharist of our daily life." It is about the type of "daily hospitality" which we share in the routine of each day. It speaks of sharing with the other in our everyday relationships in community, in opening our heart and our affection in the totality of life. This style of hospitality isn't always easy, especially towards someone whom we have known for a long time and with whom we share on a daily basis. How can we sustain an attitude of hospitality towards our brothers and sisters without falling into the temptation of labeling them and often without recognizing and valuing their talents and gifts? How do we express hospitality to one another when we return home after a hard day of apostolic ministry? Do we create an atmosphere which invites the other to share their stories? Do we listen to one another with respect and reverence as we share stories and experiences? Our spirituality invites us to be "eucharistic communities", always open to this quality of communication in the totality of our lives (see Acts 2).

The Pacific Province in some of their meetings, begin with a moment in which they "touch base" with one another before diving into their business affairs. "How do you feel?" "What worries and concerns do you bring to this meeting?", are some of the questions they pose to one another. This is very significant, since who we are and what we are currently living, will influence a great deal the way in which we will be present to one another during the meeting.

In this attitude of mutual hospitality community members not only share a roof and a common table, but also share one another's stories. Thus the lives of one and the other are woven together as in a tapestry of rich colors.

The Adorers also emphasize hospitality as a value to be striven for and to live in community.

***"In living the Paschal Mystery, day by day, in the love and availability and hospitality which we afford to others, we will become more credible expressions of the loving face of God."***

***(Decisions of the XVIa. General Assembly of the Adorers, 1991, when speaking of the call of the Spirit to incarnate the ASC charism in an apostolic community.)***

## **A PROPHETIC WITNESS**



What I would like to propose here is nothing new. The idea is as old as the Word of God which we proclaim in our ministries. It concerns the quality of the testimony which we give with our lives in community. We are **apostolic communities** which wish to model our lives on the ideal of community proposed to us in the Acts of the Apostles 2, 42-47.

The Adorers in their Constitutions say:

*"As the quality of presence to one another becomes more loving, our community life itself will be a prophetic sign of what the whole Church is called to become: a communion of love in which people of every tribe and tongue and nation are united." (# 6)*

*"We will never forget that our love for one another in community is itself a primary apostolic witness." (# 9)*

Sometimes we emphasize so much the activities in which we are involved that we forget the importance of the witness we give. Someone once said to me: "Community life is our real struggle!" If we wish to confront seriously the call of the Church to take up the task of the **new evangelization**, we must think seriously about the quality of our testimony as true Christian communities. We are called to be **sacraments for the world**, reflecting in our lives and in our words, and in the manner in which we relate to one another, "the presence of Christ" and "the Gospel values" which we announce and teach to others. Our life shared in community will then render credibility to our apostolic lives of service. We have been "called together" by God in order to walk together in faith and to commit ourselves to the building of God's Reign, being at the same time, signs of that very Reign. We will be an authentic faith community when we share with one another our faith journey. We are aware that we do not walk alone. We share our lives, our struggles, our happiness and our anxieties with our brothers and sisters along the way, as did the disciples on the road to Emmaus. We are a people inflamed with the fire of compassion and solidarity, impelled to walk with the wounded and to discover with them the redemptive power of the Blood of Jesus. We are a community which through discernment and community prayer, are fortified for mission and we are sensitized in the understanding of our vocation. We encourage one another and we challenge one another to be faithful and courageous in our answer. We recognize our mutual gifts and talents, and we celebrate and affirm those gifts. The community helps me to discover how to better place my life at the service of our community project for the construction of God's Reign.

What we are talking about is a virtual "community prophecy". We wish to be **prophets of a new humanity**, witnesses and builders in the world of God's project for all. As such, we are also **sacraments of reconciliation**, giving radical witness that the Reign and the community willed by God is a real possibility. We witness to it as human beings with our own unique personality traits, with our options and our different stances, with our particular histories, making reality in ourselves the words of Ephesians 2, 13. And we celebrate this sacramentality especially in the moment of gathering around the altar in the Eucharist and when we look one another in the eyes, knowing that we are

really brothers and sisters. Then, and only then, can we say with Jesus: "This is my body and my blood given freely for you!" We promise fidelity and mutual care for one another. And we promise "to be present to one another" in his or her needs and we commit ourselves to forge unity and communion, as we drink from the communion Cup. Isn't this what we promise each other when we are definitively incorporated into the Congregation, promising to live in the "bond of charity"?

All this supposes that we believe in our *vocation to community for mission*. It supposes also that we believe that others are mediators through whom and in whom God is revealed to us. It is as though Community were pregnant with the presence of Christ! We need the other in order to experience and to discover the Will of God. Our brother or sister is not merely someone whom I have to tolerate, or worse still, someone whom I should avoid or flee from. We recognize and feel responsible for the growth of one another and we sincerely are grateful to God for them, recognizing that each person is a unique and irrepeatable gift to the community and to ministry. We stimulate one another so as to attain our maximum potential for the building of the Reign of God. If we feel that our time is too "precious" to be present to our brother and sister, even when we use our time in the apostolate as an excuse, it means that we do not have time to hear God and to be with God.

To live the new commandment of reciprocal love is the condition for being in community and for experimenting the presence of God among us. It is also a great challenge. We will need strong moments of community life in which we can share and be strengthened for our ministries. We ought to learn to promote good interpersonal relationships and friendship, through celebrations, parties, and a personal and communal prayer in which we we meet the Lord of the convocation

We celebrate our life together, especially when we celebrate the Eucharist. Because it is there, around the Eucharistic Table, that we share our dreams; it is there where we celebrate our successes and our failures; it is there where we experience reconciliation and community strength. To drink of the Cup is to renew our Covenant with Jesus and with the others. We renew our commitment to be present to one another as Jesus is always present to us. We express our total commitment, even to the point of dying for the other and for the work of God, as the maximum expression of our love as apostolic ministers. It is in the Eucharist, where we renew our promise of fidelity, our commitment to be bread and wine for the other and for our world.

To live together, as I have proposed it here, requires the efforts of each and every member. We will need to pray a lot and to ask the Lord to give us a special dose of **patience** and a greater capacity for **forgiveness**: two virtues especially necessary as we try to be "an ever more credible witness of God's tender love, of which the blood of Jesus is vibrant sign and unending covenant pledge" (ASC Constitutions, # 2).

The tensions, difficulties, and misunderstandings, as well as the lack of unity which many times we experience in community, also form a part of God's project of communion. The road towards true communion necessarily requires the participation in the passion and the death of Christ. The Paschal Mystery continues to be at the heart of the

dynamics of forging community. It is only in dying to our individualisms and our egocentricity that we will be able to be born to a new community life which will be as a light in the midst of our fractured and divided world.

### **FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION**

1. What is my own experience of community life?
2. Do I feel that my Community strengthens me and animates me in my personal growth and for the apostolate?
3. What has helped me most?
4. How do I experience the "bond of charity" in my concrete experience?
5. How do we give testimony to love to those outside the community?
6. Am I willing to give my life (that is, to go to the limits of love) for my Congregation, for my brothers and sisters in Community?
7. How can I be of assistance to the new members, so that they feel community as "their family"?
8. How might we promote the formation of community in our apostolates?