

The Cup of Suffering

In talking about the spirituality of the Precious Blood, trying to find new ways of speaking about the Precious Blood, often the comment that we hear or even say ourselves -- How does this apply to my own life and ministry today in the Church? What follows is an attempt from one perspective to make sense of this apostolic spirituality of the Precious Blood. Hopefully the following comments and reflections will aid us in arriving at ways in which our lives and ministry are continuing to be shaped by a spirituality of the Precious Blood.

Spirituality is more than a mere motivation to grow in our love of God. It provides the larger sense of identity and direction to this response. This, in turn, shapes the way we pray, the way we minister, and the way that we come to see ourselves as a member of the Society of the Precious Blood. It is in this way that we can, I believe, find that spirituality which is ours in this day and age.

Understanding one's spirituality, or for that matter the common elements of a society's or community's spirituality in this way, helps in articulating our own individual identity, and those common elements which we share or should share as members of this Community founded and dedicated to spreading the merits of the Precious Blood to the hurting, alienated, suffering, oppressed members of the Body of Christ, which we call the Church.

I try to keep before me this question: "What does this have to do with my ministry and my dealings with people?" In other words, I hope to be very practical about this, offering, hopefully, a spirituality of the Precious Blood that is very applicable to us individually and which can then lead, hopefully, to a practical and renewed understanding of the Precious Blood.

When we stop to think about our ministry, be it in the parish, retreat-renewal, chaplaincies, even at times teaching and support services, how much of it seems to be helping people through various forms of suffering? Be it the suffering of a broken relationship, a death, tragedy or a real sense of loneliness and depression. Suffering affects everyone without exception. If we examine our own lives we are aware that there is much suffering. Look, too, to the suffering that has been ours as a Society throughout the years. The suffering when close fellow members leave the Society, when a fellow member suffers from disease of either a physical or spiritual nature.

The response to suffering in our culture seems to be avoidance. While no one wishes to suffer, suffering is a part of our lives. Too often our culture has given us ways to anesthetize ourselves -- to avoid suffering at all costs. In doing that, as we all know, we miss opportunities for growth on many levels. We are living in a culture that tries to escape suffering on varied levels. How many people have come through our offices who try to escape with drugs, and alcohol or superficial sexual relationships? Suffering most always is viewed as a negative, something to be avoided and not faced honestly.

In a culture where basic values are so often placed on controlling aspects of our lives, it is very difficult to lose that control. But, in a sense, that is what we are invited to do in our sufferings. It means to let go of some of that self-fulfillment and submit ourselves to God's will. Perhaps the most striking image of this is the agony in the garden, where Jesus prays that the cup may be taken away from him -- "but not my will, but yours be done."

This image of the cup appears frequently in the scriptures. We have the blessing cup, the cup of salvation, the cup of wrath and the cup of suffering. Certainly for the Society of the Precious Blood, the cup stands before us as the sign of the life that comes through suffering and death.

Father Winfried Wermter in his essay, "Living Chalice", speaks of our need to become living chalices, that is, to continue service to the Blood of Christ, be transformed by God's power and offer our gifts to God which will become gifts to others.

For a spirituality of the Precious Blood the cup of suffering, it seems, must also be a central aspect. This thought is echoed in a recent Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II, "Salvifici Doloris -- The Christian meaning of Human Suffering," where he says, "And therefore Christ severely reproves Peter when the latter wants to make him abandon the thoughts of suffering and of death on the cross. And when, during his arrest in Jerusalem, the same Peter tries to defend him with the sword, Christ says, 'Put your sword back into its place...But how then should the scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?' And he also says, 'Shall I not drink of the cup which the Father has given me?' " How often in our own lives are the sentiments of Peter like our own? How often, too, in the lives of the people with whom we minister? The reactions to suffering: avoidance, violence, as Peter wanted, running away from the cup that the Father has given, or not really caring one way or another.

Historically, when we look at the spirituality of the Precious Blood, we find that it has been particularly strong in times of suffering, and among those who continue to suffer. Witness the growth of spirituality and devotion to the Precious Blood in Central and South America. There is even a growing of this devotion in India, certainly a land and a people who are no strangers to suffering. If we would even look in our own country, we could find some elements of this as well. Witness the devotion that was prevalent during the great depression, and even the great numbers of vocations that came from this time. Of course, there were and are probably other variables that enter into this, but I think the point is worth some reflection on our part.

If this is true, how then can a spirituality of the Precious Blood once again become a source of identity and give direction to a culture that so often goes to extremes to avoid, anesthetize, and be apathetic in the face of suffering? One of the most basic ways is to acknowledge the redemptive aspects of suffering in our lives, to be willing to take the cup of suffering to drink and to be transformed by it.

It is precisely through Christ's shedding of Blood -- the sacred gift of life which comes from God, and is now given back to God -- that suffering can be and is redemptive. We through our sacrifice and sufferings can share in the redemptive power of that Precious Blood and invite others to do the same.

While we realize that we will never do away with suffering as long as we are human beings, our suffering can have meaning, can be redemptive, can be life-giving and can help us grow in many ways. The power of that perfect sacrifice can change apathetic hearts into compassionate hearts. The power of the Precious Blood can change the fear of suffering into an ability to suffer with another -- compassion. It is the power to see and give life to the hurting, suffering members of the Body of Christ.

How can a spirituality of the Precious Blood take shape in my life and ministry? I think it is in the language of sacrifice that we are able to do this. All of us, by virtue of our baptism have been consecrated, or set apart from merely the other things of the world. By this and by our continuing faith we believe it is possible to transcend our limits and the limits of the world. When we consecrate something, we set it apart from the profane and merely secular to the realm of the holy. After consecration an object or person is part of something greater than itself. A very similar idea, we see, to the concept of sacrifice.

In life and ministry we often see examples of this. How often have we visited persons confined to their homes, suffering from various physical ailments, to find them only about to make sense of this by their offering it up as Jesus did, feeling that they too share in the sufferings of Christ. There is a feeling that they too are now able to share in the redemptive act of Christ, and in their suffering there is life.

(Fr. Timothy McFarland, C.P.P.S., "Precious Blood Spirituality from a Parish Perspective," Cincinnati C.P.P.S. Newsletter, July 2, 1985)