

CPPS Spirituality in the USA

The Missionaries of the Precious Blood came to the United States in 1844. From that time the community has engaged itself in ministry to immigrants, to building and staffing parishes and shrines, and in preaching mission and retreats. We have been involved in parish life in our own unique way, and have involved ourselves in many and varied works of reconciliation where ever the need to the church and world have called us. In this paper on the development of the Spirituality of the Blood of Christ in the USA we shall examine the newest work of Reconciliation, recent events where the far off are drawn near, the Spirituality alive in preaching and devotion, evident in our parishes and in our lay associates.

Reconciliation

The *Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation* is network of reconciliation ministries inspired by a spirituality of the Precious Blood. Motivated by a belief that “those who were once far off have been brought near through the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:13), Precious Blood missionaries along with Adorers of the Blood of Christ work as agents of reconciliation to bring healing and renewal to the Church through an outreach to groups and individuals who experience alienation within and with the Church.

A key component of the network is the Precious Blood Center for Reconciliation. The Center provides a safe and prayerful presence in the Back of the Yards neighborhood. There they work for reconciliation by confronting and responding to situations of violence and conflict within the neighborhood.

The Back of the Yards neighborhood is on the south side of Chicago. It is predominantly a Mexican-American community, bordering a predominantly African-American community. This results in some ethnic tensions, but the primary source of violence in the neighborhood is a result of gang activity.

The team has approached the neighborhood with a missionary attitude; seeking to become a part of the community and respectful of those who reside in the community. They have deliberately moved slowly in the development of a program which responds to the violence, believing that the most effective program must be developed with significant community input and ownership. They have set up office in the former maintenance man’s apartment at St. Michael the Archangel Church, at 48th and Damen Ave.

In January, a 16 year old boy was killed a block from Precious Blood Center for Reconciliation. In conjunction with San Miguel, a charter middle school, they convened a community meeting to discuss the violence. The initial meeting was an airing of concerns and fears. Subsequent meetings have led to some basic community organizing efforts. That group decided to do some community cleanup projects and has continued to meet; CPPS members have helped to facilitate this meeting along with some identified leaders. They are forming a block club, with the first activity being a street mass. While community organizing is not the work we have set out to do, they did it as a means of participating in the life of the community and to foster relationships.

Recently, a 12 year old boy was also shot and killed in the neighborhood. One of the pastors has responded to that shooting and again there was a gathering of the community to discuss that tragedy. We participated in that meeting and we continue to dialogue with the pastor and others about an ongoing response to that situation.

Where does the blood of these two young boys call us? That is the question that our members seek to answer and which guides the ongoing development of the program.

The outreach ministries of *The Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation* seek to facilitate and deepen the understanding of how the ministries engaged in by missionaries, companions, adorers, and associates of the blood of Christ reflect this spirituality of reconciliation. How are parishes and prisons, hospitals and hospices, colleges and high schools and grade schools, convents and mission houses places of reconciliation and renewal in the blood of Christ?

Other outreaches of *The Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation* include three types of retreats and workshops presented under the titles, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation Retreat*, *A Place at the Table*, and *Proclaiming a New Covenant*.

Ambassadors of Reconciliation is a weekend retreat designed to establish an ongoing ministry of reconciliation within a parish or other ministerial setting. This retreat is not for everyone in the parish. It is primarily for those people identified by parish leadership who have the charism of reconciliation, people in parishes, on parish staffs, in the schools, on the parish council who have this charism and the gifts necessary for being ambassadors of reconciliation. Their gifts are already manifested to us in various meetings and ministerial settings when controversy or conflict arises. The Ambassador of Reconciliation retreat seeks to help these ministers deepen their understanding and embrace the gift they have been given.

The second outreach piece developed so far is called, *A Place at the Table: The Parish as a Reconciling Community of Healing and Hope*. This is a retreat for the entire parish that reflects on several characteristics or qualities that are essential in being a reconciling community of faith. Unlike a traditional parish mission that normally involves three, four, or five nights of preaching along with various other opportunities for renewal during the days of the mission, *A Place at the Table* is a weekend parish retreat. The main focus of the presentations is on how a parish might reflect the charism and call of the blood of Christ. It offers an opportunity to reflect on the themes of reconciliation and renewal found in the blood of Christ.

The third outreach opportunity focuses on the spirituality of leadership for the ministry of reconciliation. *Proclaiming a New Covenant* is a retreat day for servant leaders of a parish (including staffs, councils and commissions), faith community, or ministry site to explore how those called to leadership articulate a vision of renewal and embrace the challenge to be ministers of reconciliation. This retreat includes input and exercises on the call to leadership in the Christian community, discernment of gifts, the qualities that reflect a new covenant community, and conflict resolution. They also emphasize the importance of naming and claiming the parish's identity as "precious blood" and helps participants to envision its future as a reconciling faith community.

Who is far off?

Saint Edward's Church in Newark, California is a parish administered by Precious Blood Missionaries since 1979. Fr. Jeffrey Finley, CPPS is the current pastor. When he was asked to do the funeral of 17 year old Eddie Araujo, a gay transgender teen who also went by the name of Gwen, all he could think of was what he learned about Precious Blood Spirituality in Formation. The Spirituality of the Blood of Christ is about reaching those outside the gates of society. As the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians tells us, "Now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the Blood of Christ".

The media had sensationalized the story of his murder. When asked by his mother if the funeral could be at Saint Edward's the only thing Fr. Finley could think of was that we had been asked to bury a child of God. Over five hundred flocked into the church for the funeral services, another three hundred people were outside. The media were not allowed to bring cameras inside the church so the services could be held in a respectful atmosphere.

A fundamentalist pastor from Kansas, the Rev. Fred Phelps along with members of his family, had threatened to picket the funeral because they did not believe this child deserved a Christian burial. They did not show up for the funeral, but did picket the parish two weeks later on a Sunday during Masses. Rev. Fred Phelps was not the only one to oppose the funeral service. Letters and emails came from Roman Catholics who also wanted to be the judge of this young man's life.

There are times we who preach the gospel message get discouraged that our people are not listening to us but Jeff Finley was overwhelmed by the support of the St. Edward parishioners who told him how proud they were that the funeral was in our parish. Jeff realized that the preaching has been effective. He received no opposition from the parish. Finley testified soon after that he had never realized what an impact Blood of Christ Spirituality had in his life until it was challenged. Now he realizes it is a regular part of his life and had been all along during his journey into the Missionaries of the Precious Blood.

Parishes

The Missionaries of the Precious Blood have staffed many parishes in the United States from the beginning, mainly in response to requests from Bishops, or as a way to establish our presence in a certain area. As a Precious Blood priest and a pastor I tried to administer the parish as a Precious Blood Mission House. Involving the laity our goal was to make the parish a place where one could experience the new covenant. Through a variety of programs and events we served a broad spectrum of God's people. At one point we counted 28 different languages present in the Parish community of St. Barnabas in Alameda, CA.

St. Agnes parish in Los Angeles is another parish that has been administered by Precious Blood Missionaries since our coming to the west coast. We took over the parish at a time when the Archdiocese was having difficulty finding priests who would serve in inner city parishes. Fr. Jim Franck who is now serving in his second time as pastor of St. Agnes says that the parish is probably one of our finest examples of where Precious Blood

Spirituality has taken hold. It is a parish that really attracts and serves those who are marginalized. When the Province of the Pacific has to decide which parishes it will keep St. Agnes always remains at the top of the list. St. Agnes with its poor people was the call that needed to be answered and the reason why we stayed and are still there.

The ministry of the word is central here. Fr. Franck is convinced that his Spanish is not very good. He can only understand about half of what the people say to him. He says that preaching in Spanish is for him like communicating with your hands with one arm tied behind your back. But he says that there is a real hunger for the word of God here.

Jim Franck states that there were some significant persons and events that helped make Precious Blood Spirituality come alive, first for him and then for his parish. Gregory Comella, CPPS's presence in our formation program and in talks he gave for the community, and then Robert Schreiter's retreat for the Province in the early '80s had an impact. There was a decision made to make all the community retreats focused on Precious Blood Spirituality. It was a gradual process that culminated in the drawing up of the first mission statement in 1988. A few years later each member was presented with a framed copy of the mission statement and the daily reading of the mission statement began to have an impact on Fr. Jim's preaching and his work.

The fruits of this focus became evident in the birth and development of the parish Precious Blood Prayer Group. For them, Jim Franck says it is not the name that is important as is what they do. They offer retreats four a year four or five times a year. They focus on youth, married couples, men, and women. They give all the talks, do all the music. They have a strong outreach to people afflicted with addictions. It is an unsophisticated approach. He calls it a "blunt, go after them" approach. Many of the members of the group have come out of addictions themselves. The group has a Charismatic veneer. What is important is that 60 to 80 people get together weekly to pray and to plan, to do instruction on the bible and to focus their efforts on those most in need. They are the active heart of this parish and it is all because they have adopted in their own way the Spirituality of the Precious Blood.

Companions

Since the early 90s the spirituality of the Precious Blood has taken root in a new group of people, our lay associates. Working along side the laity in the work of the mission has been an important aspect of the community spirit since the very first days of St. Gaspar. A primary aim of the Companion program is to invite dedicated lay people to share in the bond of charity that is a mark of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood as well as the cornerstone of its mission, community, and spirituality. At the same time lay people are invited to share with the Missionaries their gifts so that the relationships become mutually enhancing.

Collaboration among laity, priests and religious is fundamental to the life of a Catholic. The Second Vatican Council made Catholics, regardless of state in life, more aware of the place of collaboration. Today, in the midst of controversy and confusion, there is a great thirst for genuine and redeeming spirituality. The Precious Blood presents a fundamental and strong spirituality, centered in the Blood of the Cross, present and alive in the Eucharistic mystery, capable of giving our lives their essential dimension: the giving of ourselves with greater availability to the Lord and to others. Thus it is

spirituality for today. The invitation to laity to become Precious Blood Companions provides avenues for collaboration, opportunities to experience the joy of belonging, the challenge to grow individually and as a group in service to our God, our Church, and our brothers and sisters.

The invitation to laity to become Precious Blood Companions is an invitation to collaborate in the work of the missionaries. Companions make covenant with the missionaries, becoming part of the family as they strive to enter ever more fully into the mysteries of the cup, the cross, and the Word, in order to express their own commitment through meaningful ministry. The Covenant that binds Companions and Missionaries together is one of commitment, relationship, and community, all important elements of a spirituality of the Precious Blood.

Companions Peggy and John Doherty were among the first group that made Covenant with the Missionaries of the Precious Blood in the Pacific Province. They were quite active in the parish and in the city in which they lived. John was active with the St. Vincent de Paul Dining room and instrumental in providing food, lodging assistance, and furniture for people in need. Peggy served on the parish team, coordinating many of the volunteer ministries in the parish, served on the Deanery Ministerial association and even coordinated the cooperation of the various churches and agencies in the city during the housing crisis. Peggy also served on the Province Vocation team along with Companion Maria Elena Byron and Fr. Gary Luiz, CPPS and she has also assisted in the presentations of parish missions and other retreats. Ministering to those who are far off and have been brought near by the Blood of Christ is the work of the entire community, Priests brothers, sisters and Precious Blood Companions.

A Prayer Centered on the Word

“The Society dedicates itself to the service of the Church through the apostolic and missionary activity of the ministry of the word” (C3) Thus our Constitutions call us to a ministry of preaching and service. If our corporate work is centered on the Word, then our corporate prayer must also be centered there.

At St Barnabas parish every Wednesday early in the morning, a group composed of Missionaries, Companions and other interested parishioners joined together in a prayer called “Center on the Word.” Usually we used the Gospel of the Day, but occasionally have used other texts. After song and opening prayer, the gospel text is read several times punctuated by long periods of silence. After the silences the participants discuss their personal reaction to the Gospel, how it affects their life, and what they are called to do to put the word into practice. The discussion is of the Word made flesh, made real, made active in our daily lives. This is the stuff of preaching. The Word becomes alive. I have known several people who were reconciled to community because of this experience. It is because here they do not meet dogma or rules or judgment. There is no homily that can turn them away. They are confronted in their own flesh with the word of life that calls them to a new life. Here they meet a person. They are surprised by the humanness of Jesus. They see a face they had not known in the church before. One who before feels estranged from church, now begins contemplating a ministry in the church that God has possibly designed for her. This does not happen overnight, as if by magic. No, the change is slow, like any relationship. But it is no less real.

This is a type of prayer that can be found in other traditions beside our own. What makes this Precious Blood Prayer? The experience is called to order and closed with

invocations that have been common to our community for generations, but more than that, it follows a mission given to us by St. Gaspar himself. First of all he called us to center our lives on the preaching of the word. Next he declared that our principle is the same as that of our ancestors in the faith: “we are apostles on the road, Carthusians at home.” Our corporate work is given life by corporate contemplation on the mysteries of the Precious Blood and the Word of God.

Missions and Retreats

In 1995 as part of a process to develop programs for the Sonnino Mission House in Berkeley, a groups of Missionaries and Companions, gathered to create a parish mission specifically devoted to the Spirituality of the Precious Blood and Reconciliation. It was presented as a pilot program that year at St. Barnabas parish in Alameda and was preached by Frs. Gray Luiz and Jim Sloan, and Companions Gerry Downs and Maureen Lahiff. In 2002 it was revised with the help of a member of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ and was preached on two occasions, in Virginia in 2002 and California in 2003 by Fr. Jeffrey Keyes and Sr. Toni Longo, ASC.

The mission is designed to form a team of ministers in the Parish or community both to do preparation of the mission and follow-up work after the mission is completed. The Mission is designed to introduce the nature of covenant, the experience of forgiveness with oneself and with others, and to lead us into a celebration of the Covenant God has established in and for us. The Mission is titled *I Will Renew with You the Everlasting Covenant*. A group of Missionaries, Companions, Adorers and members of other Precious Blood congregations of women are gathering to form collaborative preaching teams in order to spread this message to parishes from coast to coast.

Conclusion

This is only a small part of the work done by the Missionaries in the United States. So much more could be spoken of collaborative work with other Precious Blood Congregations and the efforts the Human Rights Initiative on the Death Penalty, Debt Relief, and racism and the individual work done by our many members. We are known for our works of reconciliation, for our spirit of hospitality, for our ministry of presence in our parishes and our outreach to the poor and those in need. At a recent funeral for a Diocesan priest in the Oakland Diocese, the Bishop openly praised the community for providing the only place this priest could have felt at home during his final years. It is with the spirit of St. Gaspar and all the members who have gone before us in faith that the Precious Blood Missionaries continue to seek to incarnate the extravagant love of God that is experienced in the Precious Blood.