

# Corporate Precious Blood Prayer

*by Jeffrey Keyes, CPPS*

In a time very different from our own, March 1831, St. Gaspar describes in a letter to Pope Gregory XVI how in the morning one of the missionaries takes the first mass of the day “while another of the Missionaries recites with the people the Chaplet of the Divine Blood.” Later on Gaspar continues that on Fridays and feastdays, the confessional is a “common responsibility.” In describing the missionary’s method of life in the Mission House, Gaspar lists a number of individual and private devotions and prayer opportunities, yet the spirit of his writing always includes the corporate quality of the experience with fellow missionaries or lay brothers.

It is my desire, not to imitate the exact nature of each of Gaspar’s devotions and practices, but to imitate the corporate, vocal and active quality of his experience and to share the devotion to the generous Spirituality of the Precious Blood which he discovered and promoted. We do this in a local Precious Blood parish by a prayer of listening to the needs of people, by a prayer of “holding the world,” by a prayer of centering on the Word, by a prayer of solidarity, and by a prayer of nourishment and transformation.

## **A Prayer of Listening to the People’s Needs**

In listening to the needs of people in the local situation I have to set aside my own style and desires for corporate prayer. We listen to their experience. We let them tell their story and they enable us to tell our story. One day a delegation of parishioners came asking if the church could hold a perpetual novena to Our Mother of Perpetual Help every Wednesday and celebrate with Mass and dinner her annual feast as they had done back home in the Philippines at the Redemptorist shrine. I recognized their devotion and their desire to create an experience that would nourish their spirituality. I explained to them that we were not Redemptorists, but that we could certainly include their devotion. I told them the story of St. Gaspar del Bufalo and Mary, Help of Christians. The devotions were certainly related. Members of the parish, the parish music director and I set about fashioning a service for the local church. We included prayers and songs from the shrine in the Philippines, adding a few nods to the liturgical year. We used the Prayer of Mary, Help of Christians and another Precious Blood prayer. We involved all of the Filipino organizations in the parish with Precious Blood Companions. Soon we had a particularly satisfying home grown weekly devotion which draws 150 to 200 people to the parish church. But what is particularly “Precious Blood” about the experience? This type of Marian devotion gives us an opportunity to provide a gentle, suitably adapted catechesis on God's presence in suffering, on God's love and desire to bring all people near, on the value of human flesh and blood, on Jesus and now every human person becomes a bearer of Christ, and on Mary as an active disciple. This devotion is an experience of corporate intercession including the needs of the local church and the universal church. Like St. Gaspar’s missions, it is centered around a devotional picture created especially for the local devotion. Various Precious Blood Missionaries or Companions take their turn leading and presiding. It is a common responsibility. We cannot imitate the exact outline of St. Gaspar’s devotion, but we can

certainly imitate the spirit of his mission and devotion. Like St. Gaspar, in this prayer we dedicate all our life and work to the care of Mary Help of Christians.

Other common devotions of the people in this local parish can be situated in the Spirituality which we share with them. The only thing remotely close to Gaspar's experience of praying the chaplet with the people while another missionary celebrated Mass, is the daily gathering of people in the parish church who recite the rosary after daily Mass. I listened to their prayers for a couple of weeks, their invocations and responses, their litanies and petitions, and noticed something missing. They were invoking St. Louis deMontfort and St. Margaret Mary in their litanies but were missing some Precious Blood saints that should be near and dear to us. After I gained a bit of their confidence, I asked if they might include in their litany St. Gaspar and Blessed Maria de Mattias. Slowly, but surely, this happened.

The devotion to the Eucharist in this parish was an inspiration. It provided the easiest forum in which to promote and share a devotion to Blood of Christ. Each Friday evening the faithful gather in a church lighted by a few lights and many candles. There in song and silence we gather around the Real Presence. After exposition we chant one psalm, listen to a reading from the Word of God, and then remain in silence for a significant time. This is followed by a another chanted psalm, a reading from Ancient Fathers and Doctors of the Church and more silence. Next comes a third chanted psalm or canticle followed by a proclamation of one of the Vigil Gospels from the Liturgy of Hours and even more silence. The Hour is concluded with a hymn of praise, a time of intercession using the seven offerings of the Blood of Christ as an outline, and benediction. We have informed the people's devotion with a spirituality of the Blood of Christ. We use a lot of Precious Blood readings in the holy hour, both down through the ages and modern. Precious Blood Companions are actively involved in the planning of the readings and music. The experience has borne fruit in seeing devotees from other parishes join in, in hearing comments from parishioners on how much they have learned about the importance of the Blood of Christ, and in seeing many of the regular attendees inquire into becoming Precious Blood Companions.

### **A Prayer of "Holding the World"**

The world in which we live is slowly becoming turned in upon itself. The local press and the National Network Television news decreasingly reports on anything that happens outside our local boundaries. The joys and sorrow, pains and hopes of the world are hidden from us. We fear the pictures on our television screens that challenge our compassion. We are powerless in the face of war, famine and the tragedies of the world. Corporate Precious Blood Prayer in the face of this powerlessness teaches us. We do not need to imitate the world in its desire to gain power. We can simply learn to hold the world in God's embrace of the powerlessness of the cross.

There are differing views about Internet use in a religious community, but one of the benefits of some Internet Service Providers is the ability to get news of the world. Unfortunately, one day alone is enough to fill your "inbox" with reports of violence and bloodshed near and far. This is the very stuff that the local newspaper and Evening News shields us from. And yet it is something we need to hold. Just as we hold the death of the

Lord deep in our hearts, and rise to new life in him, we must hold the pain of our world in our prayer. Otherwise our prayer becomes disconnected from life.

“Prayer around the Cross” is one such prayer of holding the world. Many places in our community hold a monthly Taize service around the cross. Gathering with Icon, candles, chants and intercession, this beautiful service which was born in an interdenominational monastic community in France, brings with it the call to lay all the sorrows of my own heart AND of the whole world at the foot of the cross. The intercessions written with a desire to include the world give us an opportunity to do this corporately. Then the Cross is laid down in the midst of the assembly and the whole community comes forward one by one to place their forehead on the cross. Then in faith, each one rises to new life, returning to the community in song. The use of a variety of languages, the use of Blood of Christ and covenant scriptures, in harmony with the liturgical year, the participation of many facets of the parish provide a rich, inclusive, corporate, and formative experience.

Another prayer of “Holding the World” is the celebration of Liturgy of Hours. In the Parish we celebrate Liturgy of Hours around special feasts like the memorial of Blessed Maria de Mattias. One year, on All Souls Day, we celebrated Evening Prayer with the participants bringing pictures of their departed loved ones to place before the altar. Just as the Easter candle was incensed at the Magnificat, so all the pictures were included in the prayer. Every year in the Fall we observe an annual “Witness of Blood” Evening Prayer celebration in honor of recent Precious Blood martyrs in Liberia and Brazil. Liturgy of Hours is also the regular mode of prayer for Pastoral Team, Pastoral Council and for School Board meetings. At the beginning of each of these meetings we bring the needs of the parish and the world to God. The Hours are a prayer of presence, making all things present to our mind as they are in the mind of God.

So what makes these prayers Precious Blood? Aside from the normal invocations and prayers traditional to our community that are added, these prayers are inclusive and they are intercessory. We cry out clearly and with compassion when life is lost and blood is shed, including in our prayer the whole world redeemed by the Blood of Christ.

### **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 ministry of preaching and service. If our corporate work is centered on the Word, then our corporate prayer must also be centered there.

Every Wednesday early in the morning, a group composed of Missionaries, Companions and other interested parishioners join together in a prayer called “Center on the Word.” Usually we use the Gospel of the Day, but occasionally have used other texts. After song and opening prayer, the gospel text is read twice, by two separate voices. Then in silence we listen and savor the word or phrase that appealed to us in the reading. When a signal is given each speaks the word or phrase from the meditation. Then the Gospel text is read again by a third voice. In the silence that follows we meditate on what the Lord is saying to us. At the signal a participant may speak one or two lines from their meditation, beginning with “I see...” or “I feel...” or “I sense...” The Gospel is read by a fourth voice. This time during the silence we contemplate how to put the word into action. After the extended silence 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 designed for her. This does not happen overnight, as if by magic. This is not the movies. No, the change is slow, like any relationship. But it is no less real.

After the last discussion, we spend some time in intercession, and then enter into an experience of the Eucharist. With eight to twelve people present it is familial and intimate. As the cup is passed, all are singing, “In the Lord, I’ll be ever thankful....” Yes, but what makes this Precious Blood Prayer? Again 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.

### **A Prayer of Solidarity**

We are inspired by stories of other Missionaries and Precious Blood Sisters who have gathered in prayer in the name of our community and spirituality at public incidents. “Not in our name” gatherings on the occasion of capital punishment, and prayers of solidarity in the face of local violence have called us to respond as well. On this island of many vibrant experiences and expressions of culture and faith, our relationship to all in the Blood of Christ impels us to welcome and seek out in ministry and friendship those near and those far.

Recently the wife of a pastor in a small church at the other end of the island was brutally murdered in her home. The pain of that community and their pastor, her husband, was evident for anyone who glanced across the local newspaper for several days. That Church, a small fundamentalist congregation, was not a member of the city’s ministerial association. Efforts by the other local churches to respond to the tragedy were rebuffed. It was a Precious Blood Companion in our church who was instrumental in formulating a citywide response to the situation. On an evening agreed to by all the pastors in the city, all the churches were open at the same hour for prayer in solidarity with the church that was affected by such a tragedy. On that evening our church was already to be open because of a regularly scheduled Mass, but we decided that, for our part, we would precede the Eucharist with the Precious Blood Chaplet and other prayers from the Funeral Rite in honor and memory of this local pastors wife. A great many more parishioners came to that evening mass than usual, and were commenting later how the passages from the passion accompanying the prayers of the chaplet provided a source of solace and comfort.

Recently the Bishops of the United States asked for a prayer of solidarity, a vigil for life in the face of a presidential veto of a law designed to prevent partial-birth abortions. They suggested that parishes which have exposition during the week might consider doing a

24 hour vigil. I brought the suggestion to a group of Precious Blood Companions who readily agreed. We decided that we would sign up in pairs for the night hours to make sure they were covered, and invite the rest of the parish to fill in as they desired. The experience was a delightful success. I went over to the church at 2:00am and was amazed at the number of people in church. There were three times as many present as had signed up. The parish responded enthusiastically. We began and ended the experience with the celebration of the liturgy, using votive masses for the Precious Blood and Mary, Woman of the New Covenant.

The “Way of the Cross” is a traditional Lenten devotion that, as a community of missionaries and companions, we have been able to craft into a corporate Precious Blood prayer. We used a Precious Blood text by John Colacino, CPPS for the “Stabat Mater” tune, along with Scripture texts from the passion. We then added traditional Precious Blood invocations, response and litanies, and included some corporate actions on the part of the assembly. A different participant carries the icon crucifix to each station, parishioners take turns carrying accompanying candles, and there are as many as five to seven readers. Some parishioners remain in their pews, but many choose to walk with the procession. Everyone present commits themselves to pick up the cross daily and follow, carrying their own burdens, but also learning, slowly but surely, to hold the world as well in solidarity. It is a traditional Precious Blood Prayer, but in making it corporate we begin to learn from one another and share each other’s journey. Having done this for three years, we now have Precious Blood Stations corresponding to the three year liturgical cycles.

### **Nourishment and Transformation**

Coffee and pastries after “Center on the Word, a simple meal of soup and bread accompanied by small group sharing after the Novena to Mary, Help of Christians, pot luck suppers, letter writing campaigns with coffee and donuts, conversation and storytelling over a cup of coffee, all this enters as well into the formation of corporate Precious Blood Prayer. Meal, Song, Story and Justice all seem to become elements of true worship. This kind of prayer nourishes and brings about transformation and commits us to action. Corporate prayer becomes corporate action on behalf of life, speaking up for the poor and for the rights of immigrants, organizing volunteers for community action, speaking and acting on behalf of all who have been redeemed by the Blood of Christ. Much of this makes it seem that many of us do nothing but spend time in church. The opposite is true. Organized and led by a wide variety of Precious Blood Companions and other lay leaders in the parish, these devotions involve many different people at a variety of times. This kind of prayer gives life to a multitude of parochial ministries as well as to a few social and retreat ministries designed to serve a larger church. This Spirituality of the Blood of Christ calls us to gather people, facilitate a communion marked by oneness of heart and soul. We witness the generous Word of God in ministry, missions and retreats, but the actions of a Precious Blood Parish or Mission House will have to be the topic of another article.

### **Conclusion**

*“The sacred functions of each day have been described above. The weekly functions are the following: On Thursdays, the adoration of the most Blessed Sacrament in memory of the institution of that divine mystery. Each Missionary, in turn, is asked*

*to direct this tender exercise. On Fridays, there is the public "Via Crucis". On Saturdays, an example from the life of most holy Mary is presented. On Sundays, there is the urban Mission. Thus, it is that our churches offer the idea of a continuous urban Mission, providing a continual and shared cultivation of the people. This ministration is of such an importance that it is a special grace of the Lord who has called us to it."*

*St. Gaspar del Bufalo in a letter to Pope Gregory XVI, March 1831*

Our days are different from St. Gaspar's in many ways. For us Wednesday is the day for "Center on the Word" and for the devotion to Mary, Help of Christians. Friday is the day for Holy Hours and Stations of the Cross. Saturday or Sunday becomes the day for communal Liturgy of Hours. Sunday is still the day for an "urban mission" which takes many forms in this modern age. Thursday is my day off. But one thing remains consistent with the vision of St. Gaspar. Our churches still endeavor to offer a continuous mission, providing "a continual and shared cultivation of the people." That is the gift and the call that St. Gaspar has given us.

Praise and Thanksgiving be evermore to Jesus, who with his blood has saved us.