

The Charism of St. Gaspar in Parish Ministry and *Retrouvaille*

Parish Ministry and the Charism of St. Gaspar

I was appointed pastor of St. Barnabas parish in Alameda, California in 1994. On my appointment one CPPS missionary said to me somewhat disdainfully, “What does this have to do with St. Gaspar?” I will always be grateful for his question as it challenged me to spend the next seven years answering that question. In a short time I developed for myself seven principle Precious Blood characteristics as my own response to the call of the blood in parish life. Different places and cultures with different needs may establish different principles, but these are the essential characteristics called for in this one particular place in Alameda, California.

Collaborative or Corporate

My first essential was the call to be collaborative or corporate in our work and in our witness. St. Gaspar would never have used the words “collaborate” or “corporate” to describe his work, and yet today he most certainly would have used these words if he lived in our time. He never thought of himself as working alone. Bonnani, Albertini, Cristaldi, and others are always mentioned as being among his closest collaborators.¹ In telling the stories of the early missions and retreats one hears of several missionaries working together with brothers in service, and even lay-collaborators. The effects or fruits of the mission were maintained by seeking out suitable people among the laity who could continue these associations that were begun by the mission. And in advising his missionaries, he would always remind us not to trust in our own thinking alone, but to work together with others for the common good. “Clinging to one's own opinions and rejecting the advice of others” was one of the things that Gaspar assigned to the “miserable condition” of us humans.² If it is a Precious Blood Parish every effort should be made to work together as a team in response to the Blood of Christ that has drawn us together and also responding to the example of St. Gaspar, working in collaboration and cooperation with the Laity, Precious Blood Companions and women religious.

Inclusive, all-embracing

My second principle of Precious Blood Ecclesiology in Parish life is our ability to be inclusive and all-embracing. People wanted to be included. They wanted their lives and their stories to make sense. They wanted to belong, and they wanted me to belong, to belong to them and to their lives and experience. The parishioners, especially from Asia, were the ones who taught me what it meant to be inclusive or all-embracing. This was accomplished more by meals and by festivals than by language. In fact, so called “inclusive language” in the liturgy and prayer tended to exclude and confuse. But meals and festivals and family and tradition are what described Asian culture. I had to listen to their voice, and to hear their experience. I had to learn the hard way that there were many things that I took for granted that they had no idea of. To learn to receive people as they are and not necessarily the way I want them to be, to be all-embracing was to learn their way of being included and to honor them. As pastor of a multi cultural parish I learned how to greet people or say “thank you” in their own language.

¹ “Historical Sketches of the C.P.P.S.,” Andrew Pollack, C.P.P.S.

² Letter 1638

Including songs and readings from their cultural heritage also helped people feel as if they belonged to the parish community.

Generosity

A Precious Blood parish has to become known as the place where people can come to receive God's generous and abiding mercy. People who had participated in abortions knew that our parish was a place of mercy, not condemnation. We provided resources and direction for both healing and support. The Diocese had an "After the Choice" program and support which proved to be very helpful. We could not keep the posters and cards with the information in stock in our book racks.

Our parish became a Diocesan center for information and assistance on annulments. We discovered that there was a great deal of fear and ignorance on this topic, and the publication of various books and articles in the popular media was compounding the problem. With two Precious Blood Companions we set out to form a workshop on Annulments and offered it two or three times a year in the parish. After a while we noticed that nearly all the other parishes in the diocese placed our notices in their bulletins, and many pastors were sending their parishioners to us to process their annulments.

This generosity extends to the very least. The AIDS epidemic impacted our city in significant ways. We were part of creating a deanery HIV/AIDS education and Outreach Ministry. It was gratifying to see, when the call went out in announcements and bulletins, donations of supplies and food for a Baby with AIDS filling up the front parlor. The Parishioners respond to this generosity, in turn being very generous themselves.

Prayerful

Prayer places us in solidarity with a broken world. 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. A few years back the wife of a pastor in a small church at the other end of the island was brutally murdered in her home. Efforts by the other local churches to respond to the tragedy were rebuffed by this small fundamentalist congregation, but it was a Precious Blood Companion in our church who was instrumental in formulating a citywide response to the situation, where all the churches in the city were open for the same hour on a Friday night for prayer in solidarity with this small congregation and its widowed Pastor.

It is not just about prayer, but prayer that leads us to what Gaspar would call the on-going urban mission. In listening to the desires of the several cultures in their prayer life, we also were able to draw them into becoming Precious Blood Companions involved in ministry. 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.

Contemplative

My fifth essential element has to do with a contemplative spirit. We are called to pay attention to the signs of the time. We live in a world that is filled with individualism, becoming increasingly militaristic, and gradually more and more exclusive. 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 sorrows, 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 attention and 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.

So what makes this being Contemplative special to a Precious Blood parish? Aside from the directive from Gaspar, "be Carthusians at home," it responds to his vision of paying attention to what is needed and doing it. 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.

Missionary

Even though I was assigned to a parish ministry for seven years, I remained a precious Blood Missionary. This may seem self explanatory yet sometimes, when we become parochial, we lose our identity as missionary. So it became important for me to make this one of the essential principles of my parish experience. Maybe "missionary" should be the first principle instead of the sixth, but these previous ones serve to define the missionary experience for me. So how does one become more than parochial?

We developed a Precious Blood mission and presented first in the parish. We invited the parishioners to work with the missionaries in preparing this mission. The plan was to then take to other parts of the country. We established an adult Faith formation program that served several parishes. Our ministry to those with AIDS, or people who had chosen abortion served several parishes. Our parish became a center in the Diocese for *Retrouvaille*, a ministry for troubled marriages, as well as a diocesan center for those who had experienced the pain of divorce. All these endeavors tended to expand us beyond our parochial boundaries.

Explicit

The seventh and last (but certainly not least) principle of Precious Blood Spirituality is the call to be explicit about who we are and what we do, not as an institution but as a people. We profess a graphic and earthy Spirituality. Beyond the cross tipped churches, the lovely art work, the smells and bells and wonderful music, there is an appalling and hideous experience, a shameful death. The voice of Blood calls insistently from the ground, the blood of Abel and all the martyrs and the Blood of Jesus, the blood of innocents yearning for homeland, whether in Palestine, or Israel, or Ohio, or Alameda, CA. Our spirituality immerses us in the paschal mystery wherever people are hurting or in fear, whether they be filled with hopes and dreams, or joys and sorrow. This involves us in their lives. If we are going to make our spirituality real, if we are to recover a prophetic voice, we have to involve ourselves in people's lives where they are most in need.

When the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) in Southern California was so understaffed as to force thousands of eligible people, legal residents, to wait two years for their interview to become citizens, it was Precious Blood Missionaries, it was a Precious Blood parish that not only spoke out, but acted out so that the voices of the people would be heard. Over time the wait to become citizens was reduced through our efforts from two years to three months. And the hundreds of thousands of undocumented people: our country would refer to them as illegal aliens, but no human being, in and of themselves, is illegal or alien, not in our eyes, not in God's eyes. There is a crying need; it is the voice of blood, for there to be a new amnesty for these people. It is Precious Blood Missionaries in California who are called to be their voice.

Retrouvaille

It was March of 1992. I had been ordained a priest the previous October and now I was in the process of preaching a parish mission for the first time. It was a short mission of four days at Our Lady of the Rosary in Union City, California. The pastor had asked me to focus on the topic of Reconciliation. He described a multi-racial neighborhood with a variety of subtle and overt experiences of racism. He wanted his parishioners to cherish the differences and celebrate them rather than let them be divisive and disruptive. Through preaching and ritual we lived the next four days together celebrating the presence of Christ which transfigures even that which disturbs us about ourselves. I shared some of my own experiences of reconciliation, invited the participants to see ourselves and others as God see us, and offered an invitation to allow God to penetrate hardened, unbelieving, anxious areas within us, about which we really do not know what to do. Experiencing God who reconciles us with himself we are called to become ambassadors of reconciliation with others.³

There was a married couple who attended each night of the mission. At a reception at the close of the mission they approached me with a gift of two pounds of one of the finest premium coffees available in the area. (One of the talks had contained a story about coffee). They asked if I had ever heard of *Retrouvaille*, a ministry to and for troubled marriages. I had not. They continued that they had been impressed with my stories; they thought I had the necessary insight and experience that *Retrouvaille* needed and they wanted to entice me to accept an invitation to attend a *Retrouvaille* weekend. I was attracted by the idea of a ministry of reconciliation directed toward marriages and so agreed to attend. In November I was able to attend and experience a weekend. I attended another *Retrouvaille* weekend in February 1993 and then began writing my talks. I began presenting *Retrouvaille* weekends in September 1993.

Retrouvaille was born out of an experience of a movement called *Marriage Encounter*. *Marriage Encounter* had been designed as a support ministry for Christian marriage but it really had not been designed to work with difficulties or marriages that had broken. The *Retrouvaille* weekend was first presented in French in Canada in 1977. It was first presented in English in 1978. *Retrouvaille* is a French word meaning *rediscovery* or *the finding again*. The first English speaking *Retrouvaille* occurred in Toronto in October 1978. There are now nearly 300 *Retrouvaille* communities in the United States and around the world, including South Africa, Zimbabwe, Ireland, the Philippines, and Mexico, Central and South America. The first weekend was presented in Italy in October 2002.

³ 2 Cor. 5:18

Retrouvaille is a support ministry for married couples who have experienced pain and suffering in their marriage relationship. It consists of an initial weekend experience followed by a series of post weekend follow-ups over a period of three months. The *Continuing Our Retrouvaille Experience (CORE)* is an on-going support community dedicated to the support of Christian Marriage.

Where would Gaspar be?

St Gaspar would go to people where they are most in need and bring with him the word of God and the Cross of Christ. This is where I see *Retrouvaille* following the witness and example of St. Gaspar. *Retrouvaille* is not held in Churches or church settings, but is most often held in hotels and convention centers. It has to be a safe inviting place the people can come to and be enveloped into the routine and schedule of the weekend. Oftentimes people attending a *Retrouvaille* weekend do not feel welcomed by Church or church people. A *Retrouvaille* weekend is presented by three couples and a priest. The three couples are all couples who have experienced breakdown in their marriage and have experienced the *Retrouvaille* process.

Retrouvaille is not marriage counseling. We do not get involved with the individual problems of the couples but simply present a process of communication that enables couples to learn how to receive their spouses as they are. The presenting couples present their experience with the process and the attending couples are given time to communicate in this new way in the privacy of their rooms. Often during the weekend we find some couples so immersed in their pain that they end in arguments and conflict. The Priest and presenting couples do not try to solve the particular difficulty of these couples, but gently call them back to the experience of first, facing themselves, discovering the truth about their innermost desires, and taking on a language that enables them to communicate this to their spouse without fear of judgment or intention to manipulate the other.

A *Retrouvaille* weekend is an intense experience of the Paschal mystery. Couples have all experienced the Palm Sundays of their lives. They have known the times when they were surrounded by celebrations and Hosannas as they were married and began their life together. They have also known the Holy Thursdays of life, the last suppers when surrounded by loved ones who lived in fear or were prepared for flight. Many have suffered the loss of Good Friday, the death of a relationship as they had known it or had imagined or desired it. Often they had fallen in love with their own idea or desire of what a spouse could be. The person they married is generally different from that idea or ideal they thought they married. The loss of dreams and hopes and the misery of their absence are often akin to the Holy Saturday experience of loss and patient waiting. For many it is an experience of dark misery. We often speak of “Friday night couples” who enter the room thick with tension, often not looking at each other or talking with others. We also experience Easter Sunday couples who rejoice in newfound life but are also still enveloped by fear and doubt. *Retrouvaille* is like the forty days after Easter where the disciples, not yet ready for the fire of Pentecost mission, still slowly but surely learn what it means to live in the power of the Resurrection.

Covenant in the Blood

The charism of a Precious Blood Missionary is to witness to the experience of the new covenant established in Jesus' blood. The opportunity to invite married couples to live this covenant in their sacrament of marriage is a treasured gift. As a priest and itinerant missionary I have learned a great deal from these couples and the dedication to their sacrament has been inspiration and encouragement for me. The *Retrouvaille* principles have assisted me in a variety of relationships where healing and reconciliation are needed.

Couples attending *Retrouvaille* vary from couples who have experienced the pain of infidelity, drug and alcohol abuse, or simply taking one another for granted. Third party relationships must have ended, and substance abuse issue must be dealt with before people enter into the *Retrouvaille* experience. *Retrouvaille* is very clear about what it is capable of providing and what it is not. One couple attending the weekend had been married 55 years, had many children and grandchildren, and had been separated often because of military commitments. After the weekend the husband declared that he had communicated more with his wife in the past hour than he had communicated with her in the past 30 years, and he asked where we were 55 years ago. Another couple had been married for 18 years and divorced for 12. Their experience was that the divorce was worse than the marriage as they tried together to deal with the death of children, or the birth of their grandchildren. They came hoping for assistance just to be able to communicate amicably in their divorce. After the weekend they were in a hurry to re-marry and we were faced with trying to slow them down so they could spend more time learning this way of communicating before returning to old habits. Another woman on a weekend expressed a tearful surprise. She had hoped to receive her husband back but was amazed that she experienced God as well and was reconciled with the church. In one portion of the weekend focused on healing and forgiveness, the priest offers an apology to anyone who has ever experienced injury from the church or the church's ministers. I personally have been amazed at how powerfully this is experienced by the couples and how needed it was.

David and Maria Elena Byron, who originally invited me to explore *Retrouvaille*, eventually joined us as Precious Blood Companions. They testify that their association with us has nourished them and strengthened them to continue in this ministry. Their experiences as *Retrouvaille* ministers and as Precious Blood Companions have convinced them too that this ministry is a response to the Blood of Christ.

*You who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*⁴ *Retrouvaille* is fundamentally a covenant ministry, a ministry of reconciliation, and it is here most of all that I feel the closest to St. Gaspar.

I have presented *Retrouvaille* weekends in California, Indiana, South Carolina, Illinois, Arizona, and Marriage retreats in California and Ohio. Since 2002 I serve on the International Board of Directors of *Retrouvaille*, and in January of 2004 become International Chaplain for a two year term.

⁴ Ephesians 2:13