

“All Things New in the Blood of Christ”
ASC General Assembly
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**All Things New:
Discerning our Charism
in the Communion of the Cross**

*Often let your glance rest on the Crucified One,
especially on His most sacred wounds...
Oh, what power is found there to communicate to all
perfect peace which flows from the wounds of Jesus...*

St. Maria De Mattias
Letter #828

Two years ago, while giving a Holy Week retreat in Southern California, one of the women who works in campus ministry at a Catholic high school in Los Angeles heard I was from the St. Louis area and said she had grown up in southern Illinois. She wondered if I knew the Adorers of the Blood of Christ whose motherhouse was in Ruma at the time. I told her I not only knew the Adorers, but I lived in a farmhouse on their property for three years. So, we shared stories of some of the Adorers we both knew.

She said she attended a retreat at Ruma in the early 2000 that influenced her decision to work in youth ministry. The priest, she said, conveyed spirituality in such down-to-earth terms. “He was a Precious Blood priest,” she said, “a Father Joe but I’m not sure how to say his last name, Nasal or Nassal. Do you know him?”

I confessed to being the priest she was talking about. I had darker hair then and was a few pounds lighter. She was embarrassed and I was humbled by how much I must have changed in twenty years. But we had a good laugh, and I was grateful to know that the younger version of me had an impact on her life.

The Adorers have certainly had a powerful impact on my life. One of the Adorers who was living at Ruma at the time I lived in the farmhouse on the property from 1998 to 2001 was Sister Mary Catherine Girrens. In the forward to Sister Regina Siegfried’s book about Sister Mary Catherine in the ASC Profiles series, Sister Joan Marie Voss calls Sister Mary Catherine “a bold and risky spirit,” and “a multi-faceted and talented leader,” who had “deep and passionate love for the congregation and the dear neighbor.”

This was my impression of Sister Mary Catherine who served the worldwide congregation of Adorers as a teacher, principal, and director of the temporarily professed, provincial, a member of the general council and general superior. Sister Mary Catherine was a visionary who read the signs of the times in which she was living and tried to apply the spirituality of the Precious Blood and the charism of St. Maria to meet the needs of the society and the church.

For example, as we continue to struggle in the United States with our original sin of racism, one of Sister Mary Catherine’s signature accomplishments as principal of St. Teresa Academy in East St. Louis, Illinois that reflected her “bold and risky spirit” was to enroll the first African American student in 1951, three years before the United States Supreme Court’s Brown verse Board of Education ruling that made racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional.

She was provincial of the former Ruma province in the United States in the years leading up to and including the Second Vatican Council. As all religious communities were challenged by Vatican II to reclaim their charism, Sister Mary Catherine encouraged the Adorers to higher

education and a deeper understanding of the spirituality of the Precious Blood. During the three years I lived at Ruma, Sister Mary Catherine and I had numerous conversations about our spirituality, and I was so fortunate to glean wisdom and understanding for her rich experience.

The United States was too small a canvas for Sister Mary Catherine who was elected as general councilor in 1965. As Sister Regina Siegfried wrote, “she and Mother Marciana Heimerman, the general superior, traveled extensively to all the provinces to encourage and deepen the spirit of Vatican II and growth in the ASC charism and spirituality.” Sister Mary Catherine then followed Mother Marciana as general superior in 1975 and during her tenure the congregation’s constitution was revised and missions were opened in Korea and India.

From the beginning of her life, Sister Mary Catherine had a missionary spirit. Decades before Pope Francis brought the phrase, “missionary disciple” to our attention, Sister Mary Catherine lived this identity. As a very young sister, she longed to be chosen to be among the five Adorers who were missioned to China in the 1930’s. But her missionary feet finally followed her missionary heart when she completed her many years in congregational leadership and spent several years in India, the Philippines, and Bolivia. She had just returned from Bolivia a few months before I moved to Ruma in September 1998, and during the next three years, though her body was frail from various health issues and the advancing age, she yearned to return to Bolivia. We would speak often of her desire to minister once again among the poor whom she loved so clearly and dearly.

When one considers Sister Mary Catherine entered the Adorers just a few years after the end of World War I and she died on December 4, 2001, less than three months after the terrorist attack of September 11 which has shaped so much of the political and world relationships of this century, her remarkable life and witness offers an entry into what I have been asked to speak to today. Namely, how our Precious Blood spirituality can renew all things and shape our response to the religious, ecclesial, and social challenges we face as missionary disciples today.

Like St. Maria de Mattias, Sister Mary Catherine and so many of the Adorers I have been privileged to know, learn from, and journey with these last forty years, we are to meet the signs of these times with the force of our charism and the power of Precious Blood. To explore how we do this, three familiar images drawn from the Scriptures that inform our spirituality and capture our charism: our standing with the women at the foot of the cross; the blood and water that flows from the side of Christ; and how the blood of Christ calls us to live as a new creation in the world.

Here We Stand: At the Foot of the Cross

In her letters, St. Maria invites, “Often let your glance rest on the Crucified One, especially on His most sacred wounds.” Imagine ourselves now not only glancing at these wounds but placing ourselves in this scene in the gospel of John. “Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene.”

Mary’s posture is telling. She is standing at the cross, not slouching or kneeling, not doubled over in grief, but standing. Though overwhelmed with sorrow, she still stands upright. We can see her face stained with tears. She must hear the jeers, the insults, the slurs mocking her son, making fun of his nakedness, his humiliation.

Still, she stands. She doesn’t run away and hide. She doesn’t cover her ears in horror. She takes it all in. It is an act of resistance, of resolve. Like those who gather outside a prison on the night of a state-sponsored execution, she stands in silent vigil. She doesn’t shout back at those who yell obscenities at her son.

But now she knows what old Simeon meant so long ago when she and Joseph presented the child Jesus at the Temple, and the old prophet told her that her son would be a “sign of contradiction” and her heart would be pierced by the sword. Standing by the cross, it is as if the sword has not just pierced her heart but has been plunged all the way through her body.

Still, she stands. Her face, her eyes, her tears reveal her sorrow, Our Lady of Sorrows, which the Adorers have adopted as Woman of the New Covenant. Her posture and her silence speak volumes. “She’s holding the tension,” Father Ron Rolheiser writes, “standing in strength, refusing to give back in kind, and resisting in a deeper way.”

When we stand for something, for someone; when we stand against evil, injustice, violence, oppression, we show strength even in our weakness. Our knees may be trembling, our stomachs churning, our hearts breaking, but still we stand.

Standing at the foot of the cross is a statement against the evil that was being done to Jesus. As parents teach their children to stand up against injustice, so Mary, the model disciple, stood up for her son. She would not be pushed away or run away from the violence being done to him.

She was a witness to the execution and “her silence,” as Fr. Rolheiser writes, “was radiating all that is antithetical to the crucifixion: gentleness, understanding, forgiveness, peace, light.” Standing at the foot of the cross, Mary remained gentle and strong.

Throughout her life, my mother has been like our Blessed Mother at the foot of the cross as she watched her son die. My mom has buried her oldest and youngest children. Both my brother and sister were relatively young when they died. My brother was 37 and my sister was 47. These were the heaviest crosses mom carried in her life, but she carried them with a deep and abiding faith in a God who was always with her.

My sister’s death on November 29, 2010, forced my mom and family to spend more than a month at the foot of the cross. During those four weeks my sister Mary spent in the ICU, we hung on to every positive statement from a nurse or a doctor. We needed to believe that Mary would be okay, that she would get better and that glorious smile that brought so much joy to those caught in its radiance would once again shine with light and laughter and love.

But in the end, modern medicine was impotent to stop the spread of death that was advancing in my sister’s body and my little sister who was entering first grade the year I went away to the high school seminary died on the First Sunday of Advent.

One morning I was at home with mom during that month that Mary was in the hospital, my sister Sharon called from the hospital to say Mary had taken a turn for the worse. Sharon wanted me to prepare mom for how Mary’s appearance had changed dramatically. Mom was standing at the kitchen sink when I told her that Mary’s condition had worsened. Mom leaned over the sink and wept. I held her and she sobbed into my shoulder, “Please, God, don’t take another one of my children! I don’t think I can handle losing another child.” At that moment, I had a sense of what it must have been for the disciple John to hold on to Mary, Jesus’ mother, as he hung from the cross.

Woman of the New Covenant

What do we do when we are weighed down by the cross? Do we passively take it, let it crush us, breaking us until there is nothing left but tiny pieces of us scattered around on the ground?

Or do we let it sink in, absorbing it, allowing it not to break us but to bend us, make us more flexible, more pliable, more compassionate?

As Mary stood under the shadow of the cross, she soaked it all in. She was like a sponge absorbing the tears of her son until she had to ring herself out later. But she also absorbed all the hatred, all the jeers, all the insults directed at Jesus. She took them all in without answering back, without yelling or cursing in return.

When we do this, we diffuse some of the anger, some of the hate. We break the cycle of vengeance and violence. It stops here at the foot of the cross.

The former Master General of the Dominicans, Father Timothy Radcliffe, wrote, “At the foot of the cross is born our family from which no one can be excluded.” This is why we are all brothers and sisters; why Mary, Woman of the New Covenant, is our mother. We are not distant cousins or

related through marriage once removed. No, the cross makes us brothers as sisters because “we share the same blood, the blood of the cross.”

Father Radcliffe points out that to call another a brother or sister—even the one who is jeering at us or making fun of someone we love; even the one who has betrayed us or broken our hearts—is not only a statement about the relationship we share in the new covenant, but also a “proclamation of reconciliation.”

This is how we break that cycle of violence at the foot of the cross: by recognizing the person who is hurting us is still a brother or sister to us. We never lose sight of that relationship because each person is made in God’s image. Our work of reconciliation that starts at the foot of the cross begins in recognition of each person as a blood brother or sister—no exceptions.

Archbishop Helder Camara of Recife, Brazil believed deeply that all the poor—the poorest of the poor—were his brothers and sisters. There is that famous story that if Archbishop Camara heard that one of the poor in his diocese “had been unjustly arrested, he would telephone the police and say, ‘I hear you have arrested my brother.’ The police would apologize and say, ‘We are sorry, your Excellency, we didn’t know he was your brother’ and release him to the archbishop. When the police would point out the person arrested did not have the same family name, the archbishop would say every poor person was his brother and sister.”

When we stand by the cross, we acknowledge that suffering is part of life. No one escapes it. To be human, to be alive, is to have some experience of suffering, of pain, of loss, of the death of someone we love. At the cross, we stand in solidarity with all mothers around the world whose children have disappeared or have died; with all who are refugees seeking shelter from persecution and oppression; with all families struggling to survive because of systemic economic injustice.

As St. Maria saw each person, especially women and children, as the “dear neighbor,” she wrote, “The spirit of this holy work is all charity. We have carved this word in our minds and in our hearts. I repeat: Charity! Charity toward God and our dear neighbor.” When we stand by the cross with our dear neighbor, we will not pass on the pain, the suffering, or the evil to someone else.

Discerning our charism in the signs of these times begins here at the foot of the cross. Your symbol of the heart with the cross and the blood beautifully captures this call “to be a compassionate and reconciling presence” in solidarity with all who suffer injustice, oppression, and inequality. With so many issues threatening to divide the human family and the people of God, we are often asked, “Where do we stand?” We stand here at the cross with all those dear neighbors who are suffering.

Making Peace: The Blood of the Cross

In his letter to the Colossians, St. Paul wrote, “In him, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (1, 19-20).” St. Maria de Mattias echoes Paul’s passion for the peace that comes from the blood of Christ when she wrote, “What power is found to communicate to all the perfect peace which flows from the wounds of Jesus?”

As religious whose very name evokes the blood of the cross, we give witness to this peace. But first we might ask, as Father Ron Rolheiser does in his book, The Passion of the Cross, “Why does blood need to be shed to bring about the forgiveness of sin and to bridge the chasm between God and us?” His response reflects how in ancient cultures blood was offered to the gods to get back on their good side. It’s the blood of goats and lambs to appease the gods and reflects the ancient principle that blood is life. When we lose too much blood, we die.

In ancient cultures, this was apparent to people and continues to this day. Too much blood equals death. “In their view of things, Fr. Rolheiser writes, “blood was the only language God understood. So, they felt that they should be offering blood to God. And they did. For a long time, this included human blood. Humans were killed on altars everywhere.”

Gradually, cultures moved away from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice. Father Richard Rohr points out that for centuries, humans have been offering the blood of animals to God to get God's attention or to seek God's mercy. But "in the crucifixion, things get reversed: God spills his own blood to get us. It is this reversal that rips open the old veil of fear, the false belief that God wants blood. God does not want us to spill blood to get to God. We are not meant to live in fear of God, and all the blood in the crucifixion of Jesus is meant to tell us that." As St. Maria put it, Jesus' blood is "the triumph of his mercy" that reveals God's "infinite love for us."

A New Birth: Blood and Water

We not only have the blood flowing from the wounds of Christ, but we also have the powerful image we read in John 19, 23, when "one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear and at once there came out blood and water." The church has connected the water and blood that flow from the crucified body of Christ as symbolizing the church's celebration of Baptism and Eucharist.

But there is something more primal in this powerful image of water and blood flowing from the side of Christ. It symbolizes birth. When a baby is born, blood and water accompany the delivery. In the gospel of John, Jesus' death symbolizes the birth of a new creation.

"What is blood?" Fr. Rolheiser asks. "Blood is the life-principle inside of us. We are alive when blood flows through us. What is water? Water does two things for us; it quenches thirst, and it washes us clean." Those who believe Jesus is the Messiah, "immediately recognized the kind of love Jesus manifested in dying this way created a new energy and freedom in their lives. They felt both an energy and a cleansing in the blood and water flowing from Jesus' death."

In one of her letters, St. Maria described the blood of Christ as "a fountain, or rather, a life-giving river available to all. It springs up and flows unendingly for all the children of Adam and remains with them, accompanying them at every moment of their life on earth to make them holy and to bring them to eternal joy of life in heaven."

Even before the Holy Spirit appeared in the gentle breath of Jesus in that upper room or the strong, driving wind and tongues of flame in the Acts of the Apostles that we celebrate on Pentecost, the water and blood that flows from the side of Christ reflects a new birth, a new creation. Those who huddled at the foot of the cross are energized by the blood and water that flows from his side. It creates for them a stream of mercy. They cup their hands and fill their hearts with God's forgiving love that cleanses, purifies, and then ignites a new-found freedom.

What is being born in the death of Jesus? The first disciples experienced this stream of mercy as a new beginning. The blood flowing out of Jesus' side offers a transfusion. Their anemic response to Jesus' arrest, his torture, and his crucifixion revealed their fear. Their blood ran cold. They were lifeless.

But now they would no longer have to be fearful. The warm blood that flows from the side of Christ offers them a new lease on life. Oh, it would take a while for the blood transfusion to work through their system. As those who regularly need blood transfusions to live, so Jesus offers his fearful friends the blood they need to be about the work of the new creation.

Perhaps washing their hopes, their grief, their lives in the stream that flows from the side of Christ is where Mary and the other Mary found the courage to go to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus. Where John found the grace to take care of Jesus' mother, and the mother of Jesus found the love even in her grief to welcome John as her son.

This is the place where Joseph of Arimathea, "a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because of fear, asked Pilate for the body of Jesus to give him a proper burial (John 19, 38). And where Nicodemus "who had first come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes" to anoint the body for burial (19, 39).

In the blood and water, the stream of mercy flowing from the body of Christ, the new creation is unfolding in the death of Jesus. Even though the labor pains of this new creation are more

pronounced in the synoptic gospels with Jesus crying out the prayer of abandonment and trust, John's image of the blood and water shows redemption and reconciliation have begun. The water, symbol of baptism, beckons us to believe we are washed clean. Our thirst for redemption and reconciliation quenched, we go forth to proclaim the new creation.

We carry this blood and water within us, and it motivates us to be witnesses of God's love in the world. The measure of this is found in how we seek to pass on the love Jesus shows us on the cross. How do we allow the spirit to flow through us to invite others to wash their hopes and hurts, their dreams and tragedies, their sin and guilt, in the stream of mercy to become a new person in the blood of Christ?

Blood Circulation: To the Peripheries

These symbols of blood and water form the basis of how our spirituality engages and motivates our mission in the world. But, as someone once said, "To do good, blood must circulate." What happens when blood doesn't reach its extremities? The fingers and toes die. The call of the blood is to the peripheries, to the margins, to the extremities of our world. Here is our impetus for mission. We are to go out to the edges circulating the precious blood throughout the body of Christ and beyond.

The blood of Christ needs to circulate through the body of Christ to do any good. But the challenge we face as religious today is though we believe the blood still flows, so many in religious life fear that with our aging communities, the blood flows more slowly, the heart must work harder to push the blood through the arteries. Perhaps our veins are lined with plaque that has been built up by too much pessimism. Maybe that's why every now and then, our blood needs to boil with anger at the injustice and oppression we see in our world to remind us there is still life in these old bones.

In his homily on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday a few years ago, Pope Francis was preaching on the story from Mark about the leper who asked Jesus for healing. In healing him, Jesus told him to show himself to the priest and keep it quiet. Instead, the newly cleansed leper broadcast the healing to all he met. Soon Jesus had to withdraw because so many people were looking for him.

Reflecting on his experience, Francis pointed out that when Jesus healed the leper, he placed himself outside the camp, he "took upon himself the marginalization enjoined by the law of Moses on lepers. By doing this, Francis said, "Jesus reinstates the marginalized!"

Among his audience that day were the new cardinals he had made. His final words to them were: "We will not find the Lord unless we truly accept the marginalized! The gospel of the marginalized is where our credibility is at stake, is discovered, and is revealed!"

In our world today where so much blood is lost through violence, spilling out upon the earth, so many lives lost, we need to keep our eyes on the road where blood is washed off the pavement every day. Here is the blood that names us, claims us, and sometimes even shames us. Yes, the shedding of blood on the cross was redemptive, our sins forgiven, our guilt expiated, our shame removed. But our inactivity and inattention to the blood being shed because of violence today causes us to bow our heads in shame.

If we are not motivated to action by the bloodshed we see daily, then what does our profession mean? Our spirituality motivates us to walk the road stained with blood, to stop and listen to those along the way who have been pushed aside or run over or deemed disposable by society or the church. To stop and mend their wounds and listen to their stories. To mark the place stained with blood as a safe place. A saving place.

With the hot breath of the Holy Spirit breathing down our necks, we walk this road marked by the blood of Christ. It is the road that leads us to living as a new creation.

Living as a New Creation

As Precious Blood Father Robert Schreiter wrote, “The new creation is one of the most basic themes of the Good News of Jesus Christ. At its most fundamental level, it means that no matter how bad or broken things become, there is always a possibility of a rebirth, a new life in Christ.”

And yet, so many people are tentative and fearful about becoming a new creation. Perhaps because as Fyodor Dostoevsky said, “Taking a new step, uttering a new word, is what people fear the most.” Perhaps we overcome this fear by taking to heart the advice of Sister Joan Chittester who said, “Try to live so that every day is a new creation.”

How does one do this? How does one wake up each morning without carrying baggage from the day or week or month or years before; or the weight of expectation, appointments, schedules the day holds? How does one separate the old from the new? Perhaps by embracing an image evoked by Pope Francis in his encyclical, The Joy of the Gospel. He recalled the famous phrase of St. Pope John XXIII who, when he opened the door and windows of the church to the Spirit of Vatican II said the Church “prefers to use the medicine of mercy.”

One of the images from The Joy of the Gospel that captures the truth of putting one’s faith in becoming a new creation into practice is that of a field hospital “where treatment is given above all to those who are most wounded.” There was a television series in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s called “MASH”—Mobile Army Surgical Hospital. The series focused on doctors and nurses near the front lines during the Korean War. The surgical hospital moved to where the wounded were and did triage. They had to make immediate decisions about who needed to be attended to first, whose wounds were the most urgent.

We use the term “missionary disciples,” but it means the same—we must be mobile, light on our feet, willing and open to going where we are needed most. In his book, The Call to Conversion, Jim Wallis writes how the “early Christians were known for the way they lived, not only for the way they believed.” For the first followers of Jesus, there was a seamless connection between belief and life. Faith was not separate from daily living. In fact, their faith in the crucified and risen Christ informed their journey through life.

“The earliest title given to them reflected the importance of their Kingdom lifestyle,” Wallis writes. “They were not called the people of the ‘experience’ or the people of the ‘right doctrine’ or even the people of the ‘church.’ Rather, they were people of ‘the Way.’” The significance of this designation is that when individuals experienced conversion, they were now a new community of faith which embarked together on a new way of life. “To follow Jesus meant to share Jesus’ life and to share it with others.”

But this did not happen overnight. It took a long time to sew together the garments of belief and life; to weave their faith into every stitch, every encounter, every experience, every relationship. It is reminiscent of the adage in social justice work that we struggle less and less for issues or ideals and more and more for specific people.

Here, your name, Adorers, becomes more than an identity but an activity. As Adorers, you recognize the blood of Christ pulsing through the bodies of each person you accompany along the way. As women who bear the name, Adorer, you form a community which has fallen in love with God and with the suffering people of the planet, and with the suffering planet as well. You allow the relationships you form both in the community and with the wounded souls you accompany to comfort and disturb you. These relationships transform you and give you the courage to walk this path of promise in becoming a new creation.

Making a New Beginning

As the French poet Paul Claudel wrote, “Jesus did not come to explain away suffering or remove it. He came to fill it with his presence.” We often don’t have a choice when it comes to what we suffer. As we witness almost every day with the random acts of violence, the mass shootings, and

the earthquakes earlier this year in Turkey and Syria. The people who experienced those earthquakes that occurred in the middle of the night when most were asleep, did not have a choice.

With our aging membership in our religious communities, we can easily identify with the words Jesus spoke to Peter in the famous scene at the conclusion of John's gospel when, after asking Peter three times if he loved him, Jesus says to Peter, "but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go (John 21, 18)." And yet, even after foreshadowing for Peter what kind of death he will experience, he punctuates his promise with the same phrase he said to Peter when he first encountered him in the fishing boat, "Follow me."

The choice we have is to follow the trail of the blood of Christ wherever it leads—through a landscape of diminishing numbers of members and increasing vulnerability because violence, inequality and the ongoing polarization within the church and the world—because, as Father Rolheiser has pointed out, we have "the opportunity to give our love and ourselves to others in a very deep way" when we are going through our own experiences of suffering.

Jesus experienced this sense of helplessness first in the garden of Gethsemane when he asked three of his friends to stay away and watch with him while he prayed. But, of course, they couldn't keep their eyes open and fell asleep. Jesus was alone, abandoned, isolated, and helpless. This is one of the major themes of the suffering and death of Jesus: the sense of abandonment and aloneness that he feels. Which we can draw upon when we are feeling lonely and forgotten.

In the most humiliating and inhumane experience imaginable, Jesus "stretched out his arms between heaven and earth as an everlasting sign of God's love." In this gesture, he proved what Paul wrote that nothing could separate us from the love of God that is revealed in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

With his outstretched arms, he breathed in all the stench of death caused by hate, indifference, violence; and when he exhaled and breathed his last, he revealed how the only way to transform evil and hate is through the power of unconditional love.

It is this love, found in forgiveness and rooted in reconciliation, he embodies in the upper room after his resurrection when he appears to his fearful friends who had betrayed and abandoned him. He shows them his wounds, offers them the kiss of peace, "Shalom," and then breathes on them. This singular act recalls the book of Genesis when God formed humans from the earth and breathed into them the breath of life. This is the new genesis, the new creation, for when Jesus breathes upon his disciples, in the wonderful phrase of Victoria Lynn Garvey, "his breath reeks of resurrection."

This is why our belief in the new creation is so important, according to Father Schreier, "because it means that...it is always possible, with the help of God's grace, to make a new beginning."

Addressing the Wounds

As Jesus showed his disciples in the upper room, this new creation acknowledges the resurrected body of Christ still carries the scars of crucifixion. We are all wounded and as Pope Francis reflected in his image of the field hospital, our challenge is to help heal the wounds in our church and in our world.

This is where our spirituality and charism speak directly and powerfully to the issues being addressed today by the church through the synodal process. In a world and church where division and polarization are becoming even more pronounced, the only bridge across the chasms that divide us is the cross. When Jesus died on Calvary, he was seeking to be a unifying presence in a world divided by sin. He sought to draw all peoples divided by race or creed, gender or culture, economic disparity, physical or mental illness, into one body, one spirit, in Christ.

As the working Vatican document for the Synod, "Enlarge the Space of Your Tent," states, at the heart of this process is the vision that we as a community of faith are "capable of radical

inclusion, shared belonging, and deep hospitality” that is reflected in the teaching of Jesus. To this end, Adorers of the Blood of Christ and Precious Blood people around the world must address the contradictions we are experiencing today. Cardinal Robert McElroy named these contradictions clearly in an article for America magazine earlier this year. Namely, how a community of faith on the path of unity handles the increasing polarization “and the structures of exclusion that it breeds.” Just as the politics of the world has been “poisoned by a tribalism that is sapping our energy and endangering our democracy...so that poison has entered into the life of the church.”

This poison of polarization, the Vatican document says, traps us in conflict, “such that our horizons shrink, and we lose our sense of the whole, and fracture into sub-identities” which looks more like Babel than Pentecost. In listening to another, we don’t try “to convince but to understand the experience and values of others that have led them to this moment.” How we identify those with whom we disagree is also important. Do we see him/her as an adversary? Or do we see them as brothers and sisters?

In addition to polarization, the wound of marginalization continues to be infected and must be addressed. Cardinal McElroy identifies this wound in the United States as the sin of racism that has marginalized our African American and Native American communities for generations. But there is a long list of those who are marginalized, including victims of sexual abuse and human trafficking, the homeless and undocumented, the incarcerated and refugees.

Echoing what Pope Francis told the Cardinals a few years ago, McElroy suggests the way we address the marginalization “is to systemically bring the peripheries into the center of the life of the church.” This means making those who are marginalized a primary mission of the church. We are called to a “genuine solidarity” that is reflected in our “supporting the disempowered” and “giving a privileged place in the priorities and budgets and energies of every ecclesial community to those who are victimized and ignored.”

Still another wound which Adorers can call the church to accountability is our treatment of women. As a religious congregation motivated by our spirituality that calls for inclusivity (“drawing all peoples near in the blood of Christ”), the Adorers can promote in the church the admission, invitation, and active engagement of women in every aspect of the church life and leadership. To confront clericalism wherever it breeds its contempt for equality. Pope Francis has initiated a more inclusive style of leadership by, in the words of Cardinal McElroy, loosening the “mandatory tie between episcopal identity and leadership roles in the Roman Curia, including directing major Roman departments.”

Our charism and spirituality also motivate us to challenge our church and our communities of faith to be more inclusive to those who are marginalized because of who they are in their sexual orientation and identity; and because of circumstances in their lives like the death of a relationship through divorce and subsequent re-marriage which prevents them from full participation in the life of the church. As Cardinal McElroy writes, “The exclusion of men and women because of their marital status or their sexual orientation/activity is preeminently a pastoral question, not a doctrinal one.” So, by virtue of our spirituality and charism, Precious Blood people should be on the frontlines of ministry with all those who are marginalized.

As a religious community whose very name evokes the Eucharist, we are painfully aware that these issues have prevented many from finding a place at the table of Eucharist. But as the England and Wales report for the synod reflects, “The dream is of a church that more fully lives a Christological paradox: boldly proclaiming its authentic teaching while at the same time offering a witness of radical inclusion and acceptance through its pastoral and discerning accompaniment.” Throughout your history, Adorers of the Blood of Christ have sought to give witness to this “radical inclusion” in your pastoral practice, mission, and ministry of accompaniment.

Communion in the Chaos

In conclusion, this sense of abandonment and exclusion that many in our church experience today reflects the chaos Jesus experiences when he embraced the cross. But the seeds of the chaos of the cross began during communion with Jesus celebrating the Passover with his closest companions and friends, and then erupted into full-scale chaos after his betrayal. But it all begins with the Paschal Feast when Jesus invites those he knows will abandon him and betray him into communion even as he understands the dangers lurking in the shadows.

As wounded healers, Adorers accompany those who have been excluded back to the table of communion because we acknowledge we are all wounded. We say it at every Eucharist: “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” We must always remember as Pope Francis has stated often, Eucharist is not a prize for good behavior but the “medicine of mercy.” Cardinal McElroy adds, “Unworthiness cannot be the prism of accompaniment for disciples of the God of grace and mercy.”

In his homily for the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ a few years ago, Pope Francis spoke of communion that leads to transformation. He said that as we are transformed by the Eucharist, we are “to be instruments of communion.” What does it mean to be an “instrument of communion”? Perhaps it has something to do with remaining calm even amid the chaos that was unfolding that night Jesus was betrayed.

An example of being an instrument of communion occurred in 1940 when a young Protestant scholar from Switzerland was challenged and moved by the hatred engulfing Europe by the rise of Hitler and knew he had to do something. So, he traveled to France where he bought an old house in an isolated village in the Burgundy region. For the first couple of years, he lived alone and welcomed into his home Jews and other refugees fleeing the Nazi occupation. Discovered by the Nazis, he had to return to Switzerland in 1942. But he returned two years later and with three companions formed an ecumenical religious community that sought to transcend the dogma and doctrine of denominations to discover the common ground of love.

Brother Roger Schultz and his three companions founded the world’s first interfaith monastic community in that unknown village of Taize. Today it has more than 100 brothers from Catholic and Protestant traditions from thirty countries and has become one of the most important places for prayer and pilgrimage in the world. Before the pandemic, more than 100,000 young people from around the world made pilgrimage to Taize each year for prayer, study, and communal work. They are challenged to return to their homes to live the spirit of Taize, of simplicity, of compassion, of reconciliation. The prayer of the Taize community has become a popular practice among many spiritual seekers around the world.

Brother Roger called Taize a “parable of communion.” He wrote, “My whole life long, my desire has never been to condemn” but “to try and understand rather than be understood. Each human being is unique. In every person it is possible to see Christ’s own face.” His life was a parable of what Jesus did on that night before he died when amid betrayal and the chaos of the cross, he created communion. And like Jesus, Brother Roger suffered a violent death as he was stabbed in the throat at an evening prayer service on August 16, 2005.

How do we even begin to understand the suffering and pain of others. We really can’t. We only know our own. But this is enough to move us to solidarity with others. In this atmosphere where the erosion of trust is evident, Jesus takes the elements of the earth, bread, and wine, and identifies himself with them, proclaiming that this bread being passed around the table is “my body.” He invites those around that table into the depths of intimacy and communion.

When he takes the cup of wine and says, “This is my blood,” he is inviting his companions to drink deeply of the vintage grace of God’s love. Allow this wine to warm the tongue, burn the throat, and excite the senses. Every time we gather for communion and come to the altar of the Lord, where the bread and wine are altered, changed, transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, we too are called to be altered, changed, transformed.

A final image: the Italian report for the synod states how “the church-home does not have doors that close, but a perimeter that continually widens.” This is what our charism and spirituality as Precious Blood people call us to do. The blood of Christ shed on the cross draws all people near—no exceptions. Therefore, we as a community must widen our tents so that all who are seeking shelter can find safety under the outstretched arms of the cross. The cross not only holds up this tent but is also the door that opens to this sacred space that stretches beyond the boundaries of nationalism and the barriers of bigotry, racism, homophobia, misogyny, and prejudice of any kind. The advance of years and the accumulation of tears has not dimmed your readiness to open doors, build bridges, and reach out to those most in need.

So, as you boldly embrace a vision of a future full of hope, in the words of St. Maria, take courage “in the Blood of Jesus which shelters you (*Letter #406*).”

Questions for Reflection/Dialogue

- ❖ What inspiration from our spirituality and charism motivates us in our life witness and mission?
- ❖ As we look at the signs of these times, what are our priorities? Where are the margins, the peripheries? Where are the wounds in the church and society that we are called to address?