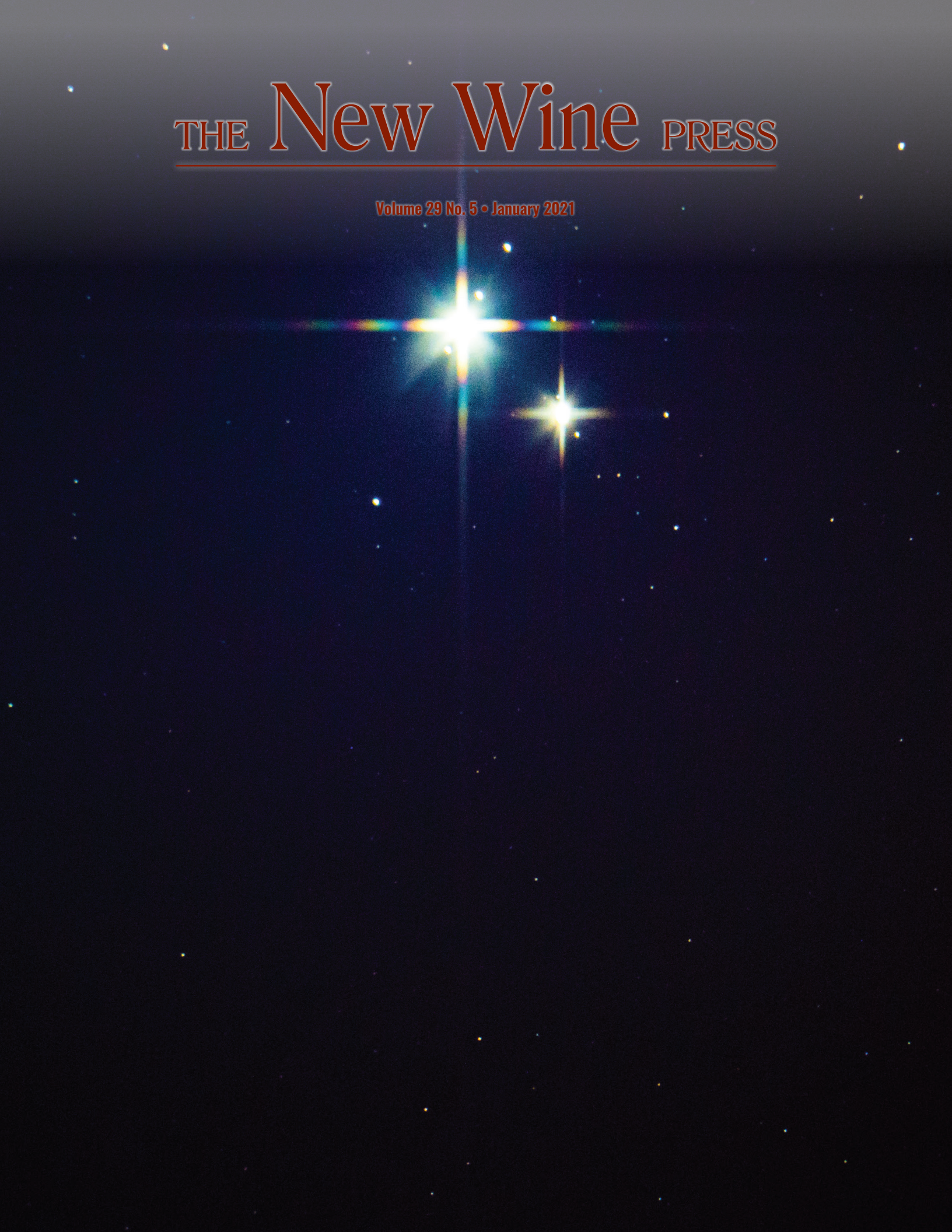


THE New Wine PRESS

Volume 29 No. 5 • January 2021



**Grow in your faith.
Build community.
Walk with those who suffer.
Seek reconciliation.**



Precious Blood Volunteers
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Front cover photo: "Christmas Star," Greg Hogan Photography

The Society of the Precious Blood is a fraternal community of priests and brothers founded by St. Gaspar in 1815. Bonded through charity by a promise of fidelity, we are prayerfully motivated by the spirituality of the precious blood of Jesus Christ to serve the needs of the Church as discerned through the signs of the times and in the light of the Gospel.

The Kansas City Province—incorporated members, covenanted companions, and candidates—united in prayer, service and mutual support, characterized by the tradition of its American predecessors, are missionaries of these times with diverse gifts and ministries. In a spirit of joy, we strive to serve all people—especially the poor—with care and compassion, hope and hospitality.

The New Wine Press seeks to remain faithful to the charism of our founder, St. Gaspar, and the spirituality of the Blood of Christ with its emphasis on reconciliation, renewal and refounding. We accept and encourage unsolicited manuscripts and letters to the editor.

THE New Wine PRESS

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Cleaning Up

by Margaret Haik, Director of Communications

It is the first day of winter as I write this. It's 57 degrees outside. I read today that in 2020, there were no tornado watches in Kansas City, Wichita, or Dodge City, Kansas. Neither in Gage, Oklahoma or Amarillo, Texas. Weather-wise, it's been an interesting non-event of a year for this part of the country.

Of course, it wasn't so quiet along the Gulf of Mexico. Twelve storms hit the coast this season. Six of them were hurricanes, including the two that hit Louisiana less than a week apart. Do you know that about half of the Atlantic hurricanes originate in Ethiopia? The storm cells in the highlands of the country travel across Africa, picking up heat which powers them into tropical storms once they hit the Atlantic side of the continent. It's amazing how a storm begins brewing on the other side of the world.

This year, we experienced many "storms" that began on the other side of the world. I don't need to go into any explanation, I trust.

Regardless of where the disturbances—weather, political, financial, or health—came from, they created huge storms for our country, and like the aftermath of a hurricane, it will take a lot of time to clean up the mess.

This month's issue of the *New Wine Press* covers the mess and what we can do to clean it up. The articles point out our choices as we move forward. We can be people who continue fighting, or people who try to build relationships.

As Precious Blood people, our call to reconciliation means that we also work on behalf of those in need. This issue challenges us to continue working for change with examples from our Precious Blood Volunteers and Companions' stepping out to help others during the pandemic. We are also challenged to expand our concept of the protection of life.

January is a perfect time to begin to clean up the messes created over the last years and even decades. Let us begin by recognizing that all are members of the human family and when we treat each other as such, we begin to recover from the storm. ✦

The Choice

by Fr. Garry Richmeier, C.P.P.S., Provincial Director

At the risk of sounding overly dramatic, we will live together, or we will die together.

As a country, we have just lived through what was arguably the most divisive four years in recent memory. The divisions did not just suddenly appear four years ago, and they have not just suddenly disappeared with the change of administration. But following the example of our past leadership, it seems we as a society have doubled down on the adversarial model as a way to fix our problems. If that continues, we choose to die together.

We don't have to look far for evidence to support this dark prediction. Because legislators in Congress have operated oppositionally, economic help for people has been scarce during the pandemic and businesses have died. Because politics has pitted people against each other regarding science, our planet is dying because of climate change and pollution. Because belief in the pandemic has been used as a litmus test regarding whose side people are on, people die daily of Covid-19 when preventative measures taken as a society could help.

The battle against each other seems to take all our energy and focus and time when we try to accomplish something. We say, "If we could only get our person in that power position, then we could do something good." Having a legislative majority or being able to simply sign an executive order gives us the sense that we can easily "git 'er done." But we use these short-term victories to perpetuate the illusion that we can do it (whatever "it" is) ourselves, without the other half of the population. We deny the fact that it will only be together that we find true lasting life.

We (not just "they") are sorely in need of personal and societal conversion if we are to live (rather than die) together. This change will require us to place our trust in relationships with each other rather than in expediency, power, and control in order to live well. This is a huge challenge since our culture lives and breathes in an atmosphere of power and control. Building relationships and trust with "the other" can even make someone suspect in their own circle. Case in point, Joe Biden is already drawing criticism from some on the left for being too willing to build relationships with some on the right.

continued on page 5





Moving Forward in Hope

by Gabino Zavala, Justice and Peace Director

In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* Andy Dufresne, a wrongfully convicted prisoner in Shawshank Prison, says to his friend Red, “Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.”

As we begin the year 2021, we are called to be a people of hope. We need hope. But where is our hope to be found? How do I bring hope to others? How do we move forward in hope?

2020 was a challenging year for us. We endured a presidential election that divided our nation like no other. We experienced such partisanship that there seemed to be no sense of the common good. We became a polarized and divided nation. Our Church and Church leaders reflected the polarization of this political reality instead of reflecting the face of God. With our Facebook mentality we irresponsibly posted our personal opinions

as truth and pushed back with hurt feelings when others called us out. We confronted our legacy of systemic racism with the murder of George Floyd and the protests that swept our country. And we did all of this in the midst of a cruel, unforgiving, and devastating pandemic that has taken so many lives, devastated our economy, and continues to rage on as I write this article.

As Precious Blood members and Companions we are called to be a people of hope. We are called to bring the treasure of our scripture and teachings to bear on how we live our lives. How do we make the charism of Gaspar come alive in our daily lives? It is in living out our faith in our daily living that we can bring hope to the world. It is by being a united Precious Blood people witnessing to hope that we can make a difference.

On October 3, 2020 Pope Francis promulgated the 3rd encyclical of his pontificate. *Fratelli Tutti: On*

Fraternity and Social Friendship encourages us to view the world as a single human family, using the parable of the Good Samaritan as a role model for this vision.

In *Fratelli Tutti* Pope Francis urges all people to come together to face the problems of the world that besiege us—which at times may appear to be too enormous to overcome. Many of these problems are due to our hyper nationalism and our recent tendency to isolationism.

The Pope writes: “the spread of despair, hyperbole, extremism and polarization, strategies of ridicule, suspicion and relentless criticism denies the rights of others to have an opinion” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 15-17). As a people of hope, are we not to do the opposite?

In his encyclical Pope Francis calls us to global solidarity as one human family. He calls us to be a people of faith and hope who show others that being disciples of Christ is the answer for us.

To be clear, disciples of Christ are opposed to the indiscriminate taking of human life through abortion. Disciples of Christ are also against a culture that excludes many categories of people that some consider disposable and part of our “throw away culture”: refugees, asylum seekers fleeing violence and starvation, migrant families making the harrowing journey to another land in an attempt to survive, people who are affected by climate change and are forced to leave their home.

People who move forward in hope are disciples of Christ who speak for the weak and vulnerable in our society. We advocate for the dignity of all and the sacredness of all life. Even for those like Brandon Bernard who was 18 when he committed his crime and Alfred Bourgeois. They were both executed in December by our federal government in our name.

As a people of hope, as we move forward in a new year and a new administration, let us live as disciples of Christ promoting dialogue and family, working together to make our world a better place.

At the end of *The Shawshank Redemption* Red, finally having been paroled, is on his way to join his friend Andy in Zihuatanejo, Mexico. He says, “I hope I can make it across the border. I hope to see my friend and

shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. I hope.”

- *We hope the pandemic can come to an end.*
- *We hope we can end the partisanship, divisions and polarization.*
- *We hope we can promote the dignity and sacredness of all life from conception to natural death.*
- *We hope we can come together as a nation and work to make life better for all of our people.*
- *We hope we can dialogue and promote our unity as a family.*
- *We hope.*

Yes, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things. Let us be bearers of hope in this new year. Let us move forward in hope. ✠

Leadership, continued from page 3

It seems we have a built-in lack of faith in the power of relationship. It is messy, it takes a lot of work and time, the results are not always immediate and obvious, and of course we all have been hurt in relationships before. But most of Jesus’ work was to invite people to relationship. It is no wonder that some of Jesus’ most challenging statements had to do with being in relationship with our adversaries, e.g., “love your enemies,” and “turn the other cheek.” His message did not consist of a list of specific things to accomplish in order to find life or build the reign of God. It was all about being in relationship with each other, through respect, compassion, caring, sacrifice, sharing, and forgiveness—in short, love.

As Missionaries of the Precious Blood, we are called to greater conversion in trusting the power of building relationships with others. Our charism of reconciliation is crucial in this work among ourselves, and among the people with whom we minister. Our most important work may be to live and proclaim that we are all in this together, and to work to help people come together as one.

We will live together, or we will die together. We do not get a choice about the “together” part. We do get a choice about the “live or die” part. ✠



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Tales from the Front Lines

by Nate Balmert, *Precious Blood Volunteer Alumnus*

In March 2020, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, I remember my ICU attending supervisor reflecting about how boring it was rounding on an entire floor of patients affected by the devastating virus.

I remember feeling helpless during my first weeks as a resident in the Intensive Care Unit—and so little was known at that time about a virus that could kill previously young and healthy patients with such devastating quickness and prove to be harmless for others. I remember the annoyingly loud “I’m Walking on Sunshine” that rang out overhead whenever a patient was discharged. This contrasted with the eerie silence that rang out through the rest of the hospital, with visitors restricted and elective cases canceled.

Being a healthcare professional during a once-in-a-century pandemic very quickly became a mundane experience, as hospital volume slowed, and the air surrounding the very patients we were called to help—as doctors, but more importantly as

Christians—became poisonous. We learned how to gown up and protect ourselves before going in to save our patients, remembering that “during a pandemic there are no emergencies.”

It was too dangerous to perform morning physical exams, and the patients quickly became numbers on a computer. It was unimaginable to have to call family members and tell them that their loved ones were doing poorly. We were able, however, to provide one last benefit for a patient before he or she was intubated and drew their last breaths of air on their own. We had tablet computers in the ICU. In the past, these devices were symbols of a disconnected society. I will never forget the gratefulness in their voice, telling families they could video chat and the love that they were able to share miles apart.

The pandemic’s victims were not only the patients in the intensive care unit. My colleagues suffered from terrible burnout. I remember talking to one senior resident who had become suicidal—not from

overwork, but from the time at home alone and emptiness of “social” distancing. Helplessness was rampant, and doctors often no longer felt that they were able to continue helping people in the ways they had envisioned when they went to medical school.

I read recently that nursing home residents were not just impacted physically by the virus—with visitors restricted, many suffered from loneliness. They couldn’t get the same care and attention from the nursing home staff. My grandfather, Richard Balmert, was one of those who died during the pandemic at the age of 96. He never caught COVID, his heart failing just as my parents and family were restricted from visiting him weekly in person at the nursing home. He had survived World War II, outlived four wives and countless friends, but would not survive 2020. Fortunately, he was able to move into my uncle’s house and be with those who loved him during his final breaths as his heart finally failed him.

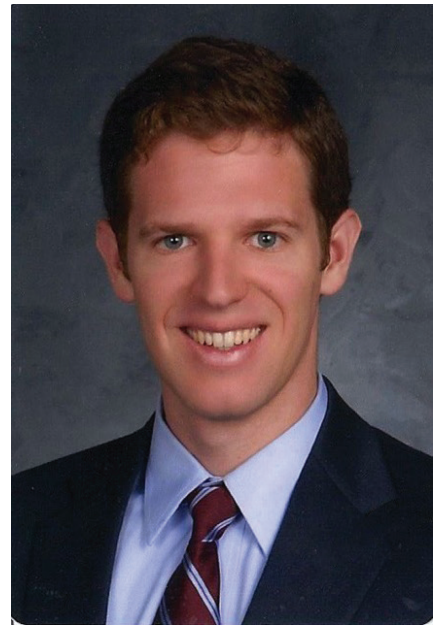
I write this now, taking a break as I recover from COVID-19 myself. Even though I likely caught the virus while helping to take care of patients with COVID-19, I still have guilt that I cannot keep working. The symptoms are at the same time strange and familiar as I struggle tasting foods I once loved. I also remember seeing patients come into the hospital with the same symptoms as I have now, shortness of breath, sweat, fatigue—but most of all fear of what might come.

One father and son I remember presented with COVID-19, out of breath and afraid. I knew I could not promise that they both would leave the hospital alive, but I also knew I could promise I would be there for them at that moment. The son was stricken more by fear—of his health and of his father’s—than of the virus itself. This all-consuming fear can be as contagious and as destructive as the virus itself. Fear breeds mistrust of our fellow American, of leaders who were not able to rise up to the occasion, of our economic future, and fear that God will abandon us when we need him the most.

I am feeling much better than I did last week, and with vaccines in production I know that the end of the pandemic is in sight. I know that this year has changed me, as I have learned so much about medicine and

about healing and about myself. But I also know that God was with us this whole time.

God was there in that final conversation between loved ones before intubation. He was with families waiting patiently by the phone day after day. He was with those whose livelihoods were forever altered by the pandemic. He was with my wife Sarah and me, as we married during a pandemic with only our immediate families. But he was also there via Zoom as our extended families and friends watched and celebrated while watching on YouTube. For those longing for God and the saints with religious ceremonies canceled or moved online, God will be with us wherever we need and look for Him. And he will be with us when someday soon we can love and offer the sign of peace in person once again. ✝



Nate Balmert was a Precious Blood Volunteer during the 2013-2014 season.

What Is Your Story?

Do you like to write? The *New Wine Press* is interested to hear about your story through a Precious Blood lense. What has your experience been during the Pandemic? Has it affected your spiritual journey? Have you been working on the “front lines?” Let us know. We’d love to consider including it in an upcoming edition.

Contact Margaret Haik at
communications@preciousbloodkc.org.



The Sermon on the Mount by Károly Ferenczy, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

For Means With

by Thomas Weis, *Precious Blood Volunteer*

I'm getting better at this. Summarizing, synthesizing, selecting particularly poignant moments laden with "spiritual significance." My parents ask me to do this when I visit home. We sit around the kitchen table fidgeting with our coffee mugs and they, God bless them, ask me questions as if I'm returning from overseas. My friends on Chicago's north side hush their voices when they ask me about my work day, like we are passing notes in the back row of middle school algebra. I hope Ms. Hopewell doesn't catch us! Or, put on the individual level, it's like a child flipping through the pages of forbidden fiction beneath the bedsheets, flashlight in a vice grip between incisors. The (mostly white) circle into which I was born is undeniably fascinated with my work, just a minute fraction of the labor Precious Blood clergy, lay workers, and Companions devote toward the ultimate renewal of the world. Needless to say, I am gladdened by their fascination. Many are even fascinated enough to offer generous donations, and for this, of course, I am delighted.

And yet, there's a nagging dissatisfaction when the evening ends and I am alone. At the end of it all, I do not want your money: I want your allegiance.

The most outspokenly Catholic kid in my class at college proudly toted a MAGA hat around campus. His sweaters were Burberry, his shoes Sperry's, his parka made from goose feathers. I believe he is now discerning the priesthood. After the shooting in Kenosha, another young lady from my college made sure to let me know that Jacob Blake was a rapist, and that BLM's founders were Marxists not to be trusted. She later invited me to Mass the following evening.

Let me be clear: I am not exempt from my own criticism. My parents gave me a car, debt free, on my sixteenth birthday. I attended highly privileged high school and university, never having to work a job outside of class to keep myself afloat. I went to summer church camps with water slides and power boats.

I've been to Europe on four different occasions. My family has vacationed in Mexico, Chile, Argentina, and Alaska. My story bears the indelible mark of unapologetic privilege.

I suppose that's why I felt I felt like Saul on the road to Damascus last month, walking down Michigan Avenue.

A few of the boys I mentor at PBMR wanted to drive downtown to Millennium Park to see the Christmas lights. As we walked toward the park, we saw an old man, homeless, sitting on the sidewalk, his back curled up against the concrete retaining wall that runs along Michigan Avenue. The man was singing, wailing, head tilted up into the yellow street lights, colored intermittently with the red beams of brake lights. He jingled the coins in his Big Gulp like a tambourine.

One of the young men raced ahead of the group and dropped half of what he had in his pocket into the man's cup. Another of the young men dropped in a few bucks as we passed. They told him to stay safe and we walked on toward the Christmas tree. "Man, I just hate to see people like that," one of them said to me. "If I make it to college, I'm going to open a homeless shelter. I hate to see people like that."

I was dumbstruck by the unbridled Catholicism of these young men, neither of whom were religious. Both boys would be considered "poor" as we commonly understand the label. Yet, there they were, giving away their few and precious resources to a man they have never met before. I saw a mixture of the Good Samaritan and Mary Magdalene, anointing Jesus' feet with her precious perfume.

Jesus was for the poor; this much is obvious. What I find to be often forgotten is that Jesus was poor. "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the Kingdom of God." Jesus tells those of us with two tunics to give one away to those who have none. As if this were not explicit enough, he says to do the same with food. Fundamentally, Jesus means that to be for the poor is to break bread with the poor. It means giving beyond what makes us comfortable. It means giving \$10 to a

homeless man on Michigan Ave when you have \$20 in your pocket. I ask myself daily what it means for me, and I ask the same of you.

To give a sizable amount of cash can change lives. It ferries resources into resource-scare areas. It opens doors which were formerly closed. But the real act of service stems from the realization of equivalence: just as Christ "emptied himself" and took on the flesh of us sinners, we must realize our kinship with the beaten, hungry, weary, and alienated. Though we are not Christ, together we might become like Christ through allegiance to one another. This is the call of Christ, not toward judgment, skepticism, and cowardice, but toward radical hope, healing, and hospitality.

We—the privileged, the well-fed, the comfortable—risk the fate of the Pharisees if we do not soon recognize that Jesus' teaching explicitly commands us to eradicate the existence of privilege. The ball is in our court, and the stakes are high. I pray that we, stirred by courage and humility, may sift through the distractions and delusions which obscure the substance of the Gospel: "Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it." ✦

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Being Pro-Life: Time to Get Serious

by Fr. Tom Welk, C.P.P.S., Harry Hines Hospice, Wichita, Kansas

We really need to get serious about reducing the number of abortions. Meanwhile, the pro-life/pro-choice discussion goes on unabatedly without making any significant impact on the numbers. The debate was especially heated during an election year. Politicians, particularly on one side of the political divide, relentlessly reminded voters of their pro-life credentials. Generally, this is almost exclusively directed toward being anti-abortion. But are they really serious about reducing the number of abortions? And other pro-life issues?

Indeed, I believe it is time for us to really get serious about reducing these numbers! An obvious *sine qua non* for having an abortion is clear: there must be a pregnancy. What if we got serious about making it possible for women and men to safely and effectively engage in good family planning? Most abortions are the result of an unplanned pregnancy, which many times also becomes a “crisis” pregnancy.

This is above all true for those on the lower economic levels of our society. Affording effective means of family planning is frequently beyond their means. What if public health agencies made available at no cost the family planning method chosen by the individual? This could range from the various natural family planning methods espoused by the Catholic Church to those other methods of “birth control” practiced by the vast majority in our society. Reducing the number of unplanned/crisis pregnancies would lead to a reduction in the number of abortions.

Evidence of this is found in Kansas’ neighboring state of Colorado. Family planning methods of the individual’s choice have been made available for several years at no cost to low-income women and teens who visit health care clinics statewide. Colorado saw a 10% reduction in abortions over the course of three years. If the number of abortions provided to out-of-state residents were removed, the percentage of reduction would be even greater.

Getting serious about being pro-life is making sure that people in general have access to good health care,

and that pregnant women above all have access. As T.R. Reed wrote in the *Washington Post*, “Increasing health care coverage is one of the most powerful tools for reducing the number of abortions—a fact proved by years of experience in other industrialized nations. All the other advanced, free-market democracies provide health care coverage for everybody. And all of them have lower rates of abortion than does the United States.”

Reed quotes a Roman Catholic cardinal in England, “If that frightened, unemployed 19-year-old knows that she and her child will have access to medical care whenever it’s needed, she’s more likely to carry the baby to term. Isn’t it obvious?”

Unfortunately, it appears that this is not that obvious to those politicians who want to get rid of the Affordable Care Act. How in the world can reducing access to medical care reduce the number of abortions? Medicaid expansion is also a no-no for politicians in many states, including the State of Kansas.

Being serious about being pro-life cannot just be limited to opposing abortion. It is contradictory to claim to be pro-life and at the same time support the death penalty. On the federal level, the present administration has executed more people in 2020 than



in the last 57 years combined. As of this writing, there is a rush to execute more people in the remaining days before a new president is sworn in.

Over the years there has been much discussion about denying Communion to Catholic politicians who are pro-choice. There is limited discussion about denying Communion to those Catholic office holders who are in charge of federal executions. Archbishop Emeritus Charles Chaput of Philadelphia in *First Things* (December 4, 2020) writes that pro-choice



public figures who identify as “Catholic” give scandal to the faithful by receiving Communion. Chaput does not appear to have a problem permitting pro-death penalty Catholic public figures, such as Attorney General Bill Barr, to receive Communion. The official Catholic Church

teaching on this question is clear: state execution via the death penalty is immoral.

Being serious about pro-life means that we take care of the vulnerable in our midst, particularly during this pandemic crisis. It is incumbent on us to do what is necessary to stem the spread of COVID-19. It is the elderly and those with compromising medical conditions who are most likely to suffer dire effects from this virus. We need to avoid putting vulnerable people at risk by conscientiously wearing masks and taking other precautions to prevent spreading

the virus. That is being pro-life. It is not pro-life to advocate what Lt. Governor Dan Patrick of Texas proposed, namely that senior citizens should be willing to risk their lives, sacrifice themselves for the sake of the economy. Since when are dollars more important than lives? This kind of position definitely is not being pro-life.

Governor Laura Kelley of Kansas, after reading an emotional letter from a constituent whose elderly mother had died from the coronavirus, had an angry response to COVID-19 deniers who maintain it is not a big deal, since the deaths are primarily among the elderly. So much for being pro-life across the board!

Being serious about pro-life means we must take care of the stranger, the immigrant. There is nothing pro-life about separating children from their parents (It is hard to imagine what it was like for breast-feeding babies to be torn from their mothers’ arms!) at the border and putting them in cages. As of this writing, 628 children still are waiting to be reconnected with their parents. There is nothing humane or pro-life about such a cruel policy.

Being serious about pro-life is ensuring we take care of our planet. As Daniel Horan (*National Catholic Reporter*, December 9, 2020) writes, “There is no greater threat to life—human and non-human alike—than global climate change. Advocacy on behalf of discrete human populations, such as the unborn or the elderly, will prove futile if there is no habitable planet on which such people can live and upon which all living creatures depend for life.” There is nothing pro-life in discounting scientific evidence and denying climate change. We have only one world in which we can live, and we must do everything to protect our planet for those who come after us. There is nothing pro-life in neglecting our children and grandchildren’s future.

Life is sacred; from its very beginning to its very end. We must be conscientious about protecting this sacred gift, both for ourselves individually and collectively. It is time for us to get really serious about being pro-life in all facets of the life-journey. We put ourselves in peril by neglecting to do so. ✠



Trish and John Frazer's dog, Sylvie visiting nursing home residents during COVID-19 lockdowns.

Working Beyond Barriers

by Trish Frazer, Lake Mary, Florida Companion

2020. Some would probably say this is like those four-letter words to avoid. This year certainly didn't begin that way. For John, Sylvie, and me the year began just like the year before. We delighted in seeing friends, spending time with family, and enjoying the beautiful Florida winter months. Weekdays were busy with work—and, of course, Sylvie's outings as a Certified Therapy Dog. Sylvie and John would sit with underprivileged children, and while the children read stories to Sylvie, John would help the children if they stumbled over words. Then there were the visits to two nursing homes, hospital visits, and—on Saturday's—Sylvie had agility class and then a visit to the Children's home. We also had last minute requests to support events which gave Sylvie the opportunity to share her love with animal lovers or children that have never petted a dog.

That all changed on March 1 when our state's governor announced that two Floridians had just tested positive for the COVID-19 virus. By March 9, Florida declared a state of emergency. Churches, schools, theme parks, gyms, and restaurants were closing their doors and nursing homes went into lock-down. By the end of March, Florida counties issue their first "stay at home" order, the beaches were closed and the COVID numbers skyrocketed. My job was deemed essential

back in 2005 due to the five hurricanes that slammed into Florida, so I continued to work.

But for John and Sylvie, everything stopped. No school or nursing home visits and no events or classes. By the beginning of April, like an approaching hurricane, COVID consumed the news, sending people into a panic. It would have been very easy to spend time thinking of self-survival with all the doom and gloom in the media. But this was an opportunity to pause



and enjoy just being together without needing to rush out as soon as I got home from work. Our lives slowed to a gentle pace. In the evenings, we enjoyed home cooked dinners on the porch while listening to the birds. We watched the gopher turtles roam the yard and the bees enjoying the flowers. Although this may seem perfect, something was missing, and we felt a tugging at our hearts. Sylvie was restless and we recalled something we once read. Fr. Dave Kelly wrote “our lives are intertwined with one another” and we knew what was missing.

Our hearts yearned for the friends we made during Sylvie’s visits, especially those in the nursing homes. We reflected on the happy faces that would greet us. While Sylvie sat quietly, she would gaze upward with loving eyes as John and I listened to stories of long ago. For some, this lockdown has been filled with loneliness and empty hours wondering if they’ve been abandoned.

Perhaps it was our roots in Precious Blood spirituality that kept gnawing at our inner-self. “What about those on the fringes? What about those forgotten?” We wanted to continue the Therapy Dog work, but the restrictions prevented it. Church moved to Zoom or the internet. Nursing homes went from facility lock down to room lockdown. We couldn’t get over the thought of all those people not being able to see anyone from the outside. Some have no family and were not even getting phone calls. As coordinator for the visits, I set out to let them know we still think about them and care. We started making flyers to give residents updates on the dogs and handlers, and letting them know that we miss them and will visit as soon as it is safe.

When the COVID numbers dropped, John and Sylvie were allowed to visit the school again, but only to walk through the class rooms for a quick visit with each child. The children were spaced out for social distancing and everyone had to wear masks. The children would say they missed the days they could sit and read to Sylvie. And John’s heart broke to see the sadness behind the masks.

By the end of August, one nursing home said we would be allowed back for visits, but as the numbers

climbed the second time the visits got canceled. Again, we all dealt with the rollercoaster of emotions. The solution was the handlers would wear masks so that we were meeting County rules and would walk around the outside of the building, waving hello through the windows and glass doors. As our eyes met there was a spark of joy and recognition! We are now greeted with “thumbs up” and “kisses” through the glass.

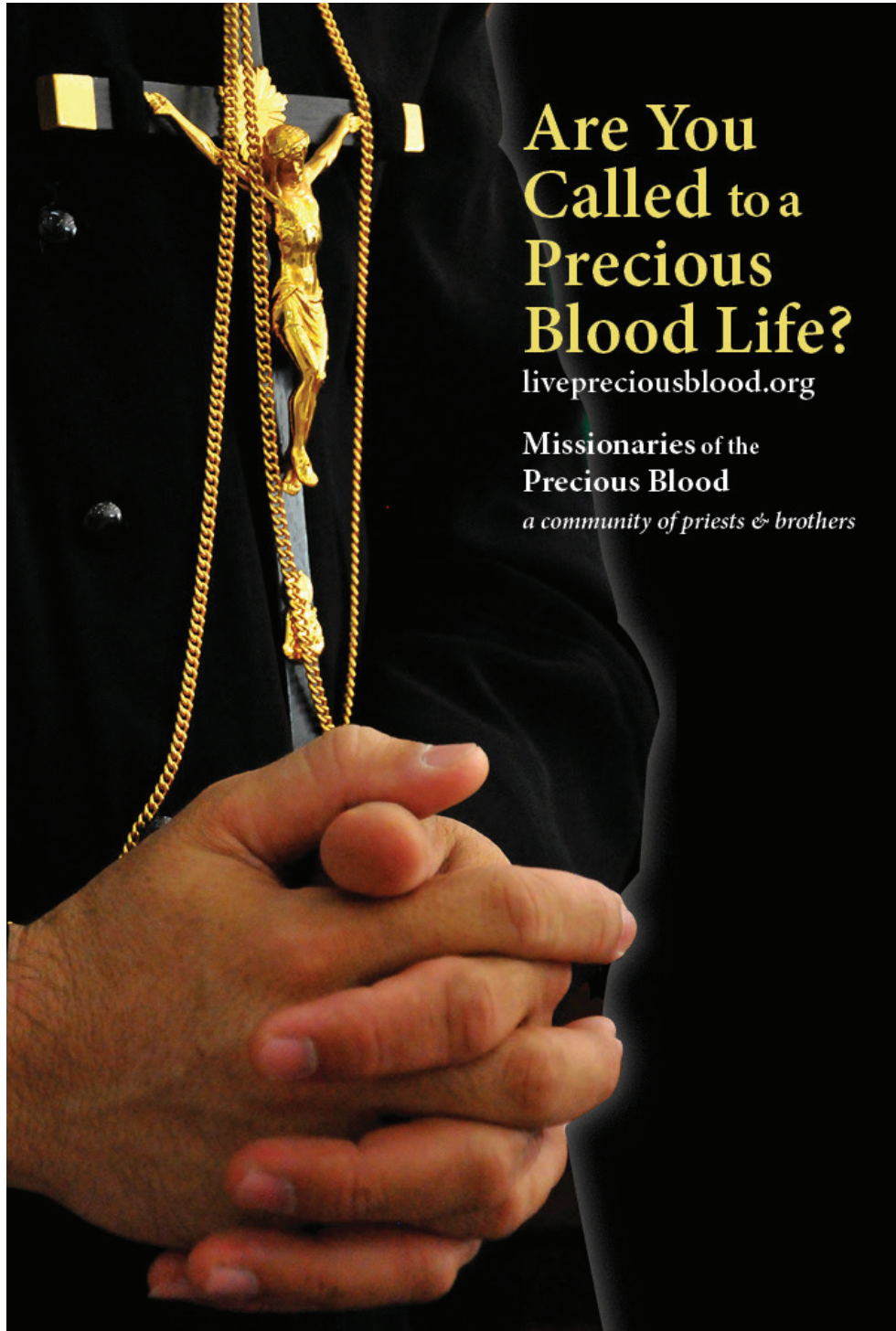
In October the hospital visits resumed, but only with the nurses’ station. Even though we wear masks, we can only visit patients if they are out of their room. On Thanksgiving night, we saw masked smiles so bold and eyes so bright. Several nurses said they were just finishing a 12-hour shift and were exhausted, but after being with the dogs thought they could do another shift if needed.

As Precious Blood people we know we are called to go where the people “are,” especially those who are alone, and we are happiest when we are serving others. We are all compelled to respond to the call of the blood and to openly share our gift of hospitality, reaching out to the lonely, even if only through glass doors. ✦



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