

LAY MINISTRY ON THE EDGES AND MARGINS

Pat Large, Companion

Yes, I believe that this is a time for mercy. The Church is showing her maternal side, her motherly face, to a humanity that is wounded. She does not wait for the wounded to knock on her doors. She looks for them on the streets, She gathers them in, She embraces them, She takes care of them, She makes them feel loved.

—Pope Francis

Writing about Precious Blood spirituality and lay ministry on the edges and margins is something of a daunting task to undertake for one who does not fancy herself as a writer or public speaker. In the end, one has to throw caution to the winds and just jump in with both feet. I believe that is called faith.

Brother Gabriel Bridges, C.P.P.S., served as my mentor, number one cheerleader and dear friend until he went home to heaven. It was during that time he encouraged me to resume writing theological reflections for his perusal and comments. The treasured time we spent together was most helpful and enlightening as I was learning and evolving as a lay associate of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood. It was during the same time frame as the Companion movement appreciative discernment process was taking place across the United States and ultimately the *Gather, Send* vision statement was discerned. Fr. Ben Berinti, C.P.P.S., speaking to a group of Companions during an annual retreat stated:

We have an incarnational, apostolic spirituality. Incarnational means we root our spirituality in Jesus Christ, who came to earth, served the people, and gave his life for us. Where do we put all our cards? We look for the Word Made Flesh in every way that we can find it. We are not floating around in the clouds. We listen to the stories of Jesus, see how he served, and in turn keep our feet rooted on the ground. We are also apostolic, which means we tend toward active ministries over contemplative. That's what our founder, St. Gaspar del Bufalo, set before us: we find practical ways to serve. We give ourselves in service to the Gospel.

As a lay pastoral minister, referring to the gospels to either hear what Jesus has to say or see what he is doing in a particular situation is an excellent way to proceed when ministering to those on the edges and margins of society. The gospel of Matthew 25:31-46 on the Last Judgment leaves no confusion about who those on the edges and margins are. Bishop Robert Barron, commenting on this scripture in Matthew says,

There is something awful about the specificity of these demands. This is not love in the abstract, having affection for "humanity." It is caring for that person who is homeless, for that person who is ill, for that person who is in prison. We do not take our money, our social status, our worldly power into the next world but we do take the quality of our love.

Where do we put all our cards? We find that the edges and margins of society are all encompassing. All life is precious and all are in need of reconciliation. As an evangelizing community of missionary disciples, we are called to bring hope to a wounded world. We are called to bring dignity, compassion, and mercy . . . not judgment. We are to lift up, affirm, and empower others. Our covenant relationship of spirituality, community and mission is not a passive or stagnant thing, but a graced gift from God . . . an

active, ongoing, daily faith journey of walking together down the road. It becomes who we are, how we are to be and to live, and how we minister. C.S. Lewis in *Weight of Glory* says, "Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses."

Who is this holy neighbor? This covers the whole range of the faces of Christ one will encounter. My neighbor is the third grader who told me he was obnoxious and left me to wonder how many times he has been labeled and told he was obnoxious in his short life. My neighbor is the night phone call or text message needing someone to listen. My neighbors are those sleeping on air mattresses in the cold shelter who I will share morning coffee and listen to their stories. My neighbor is someone struggling with depression and anxiety or addiction. My neighbor is my boss whose marriage just fell apart and he needs a safe place to cry. My neighbor is the mother of a LGBTQ son who needs an understanding ear as she shares her son's pain and loneliness.

A young United Methodist Church pastor asked the following question on his Facebook page, "My sermon this weekend is entitled *Fight or Flight* and I need some crowdsourcing help. When is it okay to fight (not physical fighting)? When is it okay to flee?" My reply came immediately: "It is okay to fight for those on the margins and edges of society and for those that have no voice. It is okay to fight against injustice and poverty. It is okay to flee when you are being verbally or physically abused or bullied. It is okay to flee a situation where your safety and well-being are threatened, or it is morally objectionable to your beliefs."

I found Precious Blood spirituality transcends denominational and racial barriers and we have much in common. I hope someday to meet this young pastor. I greatly admire the work he is doing where he ministers and the work he is doing in the Trotwood, Ohio, community.

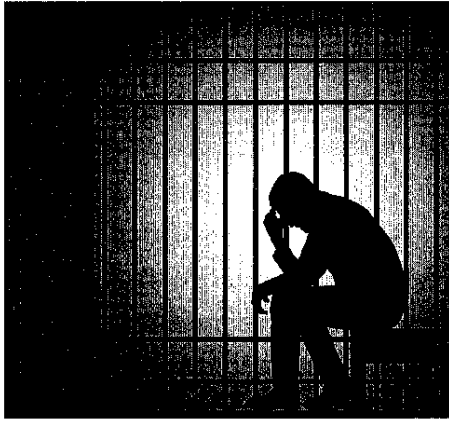
While standing at the foot of the Cross with Mary, one comes to realize that we each have those moments which require a simple yes or no response. How will you answer the call? Which road will you travel on your faith journey? The road familiar and comfortable or the one not taken which will lead you to the edges and the margins.

Just as once the bell has been rung, you cannot *unring* it. Once you hear the cry of the Blood, you cannot *unhear* the cry. Once you see the crucified Christ in another, you cannot *unsee* the suffering face. It is what I call two sides to one coin . . . the agony and the ecstasy. You can't have one side without the other.

Spiritual Father Vincent J. Donovan, in *Christianity Rediscovered*, notes, "Evangelization is a process of bringing the gospel to people where they are, not where you would like them to be." I believe responding to the Corporal Works of Mercy is a way of evangelizing without using words. I also believe it is Precious Blood spirituality to the edges and margins at its best.

In the late summer of 2014, I received a letter from a prison inmate, Tim, in Illinois. He was asking if he could become a Companion.

After conferring with Fr. David Matz, C.P.P.S., the interim Director of the Companion movement at the time and also with the Carthage Companion group sponsor, it was decided to write a letter to the Cincinnati Provincial Council to inform them we were going to approach the Carthage Companion group about accepting this young man to enter into formation to become a Companion. In the letter, we expressed this ministry to be inspired by St. Gaspar's example of reaching out to prisoners in his time and a response to the cry of the blood to bring hope and reconciliation to those on the edges of society. We wanted to live out the words of the Companion's Vision statement to, "step out, stand up and speak clearly about the Precious Blood of Jesus". We believed that God had presented us with this opportunity to journey with Tim and in so doing, to evolve and grow in ways of new understanding that all blood is precious.



We did a circle process with the Companion group and consensus was reached to extend an invitation to him. I journeyed with Tim during his inquiry and formation, which was done by mail correspondence over a period of two years. About six months into the

process, my husband Jim and I began to visit Tim at a maximum-security correctional facility in Illinois on a regular basis. Tim made his first covenant with the Missionaries of the Precious Blood in the fall of 2016. The Very Rev. Larry Hemmelgarn, C.P.P.S., Cincinnati Provincial Director, visited Tim at the Correctional Center at the time of his covenant. Tim has since made his first three-year renewal covenant. This is a journey that I never had an inkling I was going to be involved in or make. I am not engaged in prison ministry, but I have had the honor and privilege of accompanying and walking with Tim on his faith journey as a Companion along with my husband for the last three and one-half years. It has been only by the grace of God and with the support of my husband, our son and daughter, our friends as well as our Precious Blood brothers and sisters that we have made this walk. The road is not always easy and has at times left me in tears of dismay, but more often than not in tears of joy and laughter. This is an ongoing learning experience and I have had to learn to meet Tim where he was physically, spiritually, and also learning to look through his eyes from an inmate's perspective and not mine. I have to prepare before each visit, by emptying myself, so I can be totally present to Tim.

One morning as I was preparing for a visit, it seemed like I was playing a game of *Where's Waldo?* This is where one tries to find

Waldo in a collage of many different people. As I was praying and walking around outside looking for God, I found he was not in the many places where I sought to *behold* him. Not up in the trees, not in the shelter house of picnic tables, not on the park benches, not in the thorny rose bush, not sitting on the stump, not on the bridge and not on the ridge, not in the mighty Mississippi River. I took a bunch of pictures and I did not find him in those either. I was using my *outside* eyes seeking him, but I needed to use my *inside* eyes first. Voila! He was sitting in the very core of my being . . . smack dab in the middle of my heart!

Once I found him with my *inside* eyes...only then was I able to see him with my *outside* eyes. Where was I to behold my God of surprises? He was sitting right next to me at a visitor's table in a maximum-security prison. He was silently struggling to get used to having a lot of people surround him physically in an open population situation. He had not been in this position or experienced it in at least four years. He had either spent those years in segregation or protective custody. It is an adjustment he was making one step and one day at a time.

Later, I was able to talk to Tim about his place in the mystical Body of Christ and to remind him that the Body was not whole without him. We also discussed that when he was ready, there was a place at the great banquet table of the Lord for him also. I didn't begin to fully understand until that moment, how shattered his self-esteem was. When I looked into his face, I saw the peace that for a few seconds replaced his anxiety. I knew at that moment; I was looking into the face of the Crucified Lord. How many do not realize their worth and value in the Body of Christ?

Fr. J. Michael Sparough, SJ, shares this story:

I celebrated my first Mass on this great feast of Christ the King. As an ordination gift, my brothers and sisters presented me with a commitment ring. Inscribed inside

is the question asked twice in today's Gospel: "Lord, when did we see you hungry?" It's a daily reminder that Our King comes to us in the distressing disguise of the poor. The irony of this question is that both the righteous and the lost ask it. Neither realize that the daily acts of kindness for the least of our brothers and sisters are the real test of whether our faith in Jesus is sincere or bogus.

We who call ourselves Christians have heard this parable for the last 2,000 years. We can't claim ignorance. One day we will stand before the throne of grace, and we pray that we will not have left our King hungry, thirsty, naked or alone.

This journey is somewhat like watching an egg hatch. First a little hole appears in the shell and then the hole gets progressively bigger and bigger. Someday, by the grace of God, the new life will emerge in its entirety and I will *behold* once again the generosity and abundance of the God of extravagant love and tender mercies.

Standing once again at the foot of the cross with Mary and looking up with my *inside* eyes, a new realization took place. I have been known to declare in the words of that powerful hymn: *it is well with my soul*. It was time to look from a new and different perspective. I soon became aware as long as there are those on the fringes, edges and margins of society; as long as there are those missing from the Lord's great banquet table; as long as there are those wounded, broken and suffering in the Body of Christ . . . I cannot and will not be able to declare again; *It is well with my soul*. It cannot be well with my soul as long as it is not well within the Body of Christ. I cannot separate myself from my brothers and sisters.

There is a crucifix that hangs in the lobby of the St. Gaspar resident entrance at St. Charles Center. It hangs in a room with an extremely high ceiling. Being of short stature, the first time I gazed upon this crucifix, my eyes landed on the knees of Jesus. I had never seen a crucifix of Jesus with bloody knees before. Of

course, he would have bloody knees, he fell how many times? How many of us are walking around with bloody and skinned up knees? We all are wounded, scarred and broken in some way and in need of the healing touch of God. We are as Henry Nouwen would say, "wounded healers." I have now made my way up the crucifix to the chest and shoulders of Jesus and I notice that the blood from the wounds of crown of thorns have dripped on his chest and shoulders. I stand there quietly with Mary looking up. Glory to the Blood of Jesus. Now and forever.

I am grateful for the amazing grace of God and for the community support of our Precious Blood family, my family and friends, and Holy Redeemer Church (my parish faith community). It is for all these reasons and with these blessed people that I am able to remain steadfast and faithful at all. A person of trust and hope for the long haul. As a Companion of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood who is attentive and responsive to the call of discipleship, the cry of the Blood and to build up the kingdom of God; I continue to talk the talk and walk the walk. I am still running the race. I try to live out the gospel in my own simple way and rely on the gifts of the Holy Spirit and others. Why does my heart hurt so? Is it for the people and the dreams yet to be born? I ask myself, why do you keep doing this over and over again? A whole lifetime of ministry of walking new paths and making new trails and being scoffed at and ridiculed for dreaming big dreams and marching to a drummer no one else seems to hear.

A still, quiet voice speaks in a hushed whisper, "Remember, this is not about you. This is about the broken and the fragile, the lonely and afraid, my people, my Body . . . that is all you need to know. I am still in my heaven and the Spirit of the Living God is alive and well. Step out, stand up and speak clearly about the Precious Blood of Jesus." Tomorrow is a new day for dreaming dreams and marching to the unheard beats of the drum.