

The Feast of the Most Precious Blood

From the Alleluia Verse of this Mass: *Si testimonium hominum accipimus, testimonium Dei majus est.* (If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater.) [1John 5,9]

I have always been struck by the inscription over the door of Westminster Cathedral: *Domini Jesu Rex et Redemptor per Sanguinem Tuum Salva Nos* (Lord Jesus, King and Redeemer, save us by your blood). The cathedral is dedicated to the Most Precious Blood and in the revised calendar of this diocese, today is the feast of the Dedication of our Cathedral. In preparing my thoughts for this homily, I realised that strangely I had rarely heard a homily about the Precious Blood, so I am delighted to have the opportunity to do so today. This said, the devotion is one of the oldest in the Church. I suppose we might say that Our Lady and St Joseph were the first to adore the Most Precious Blood of their infant Son on the day of His circumcision as the first drops of His Precious Blood were shed for our salvation. At the Last Supper, Our Lord ascribes to His blood the same life-giving power that belongs to His flesh. The Apostles, St. Peter, St. John and above all St. Paul, regard It as synonymous with Our Lord's Passion and Death, that is, the source of redemption. The Precious Blood is therefore a part of the Sacred Humanity of Christ and hypostatically united to the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity.

In the fifteenth century, some theologians, with a view of determining whether the blood shed by our Saviour during His Passion remained united to the Eternal Word or not, raised the point as to whether the Precious Blood is an essential part or only a concomitant of the Sacred Humanity. If an essential part, they argued, it could never be detached from the Eternal Word; if a concomitant only, it could. The Dominicans held the first view, and the Franciscans the second. Pope Pius II, in whose presence the debate took place, rendered no doctrinal decision on the point at issue. The Council of Trent called the body and blood of Jesus "*partes Christi Domini*", so it seems that the trend of theological thought has been in favour of the Dominican teaching.

Conscious of where we are this evening, it is a happy fact that Father Frederick Faber treats this very matter, in his wonderful study, *The Precious Blood*. He writes: "*It is not merely a concomitant of the flesh, an inseparable accident of the body. The blood itself, as blood, was assumed directly by the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity*". So we understand that the blood shed during the Passion on the first Good Friday was therefore reunited to the body of Christ at the Resurrection, with the possible exception of a few particles which instantly lost their union to the Word and became holy relics to be venerated but not adored. Some such particles may have adhered and still adhere to the instruments of the Passion, e.g. the nails from the Cross, the scourging pillar, the Scala Sancta conserved in Rome. Several places such as Bruges and Mantua claim, on the strength of ancient tradition, to possess relics of the Precious Blood, but it is often difficult to tell whether the traditions are reliable.

What we can say, without any fear of contradiction, is that viewed as a part of the Sacred Humanity hypostatically united to the Word, the Precious Blood deserves worship or adoration. In this, we can liken It to the Sacred Heart or the Precious Wounds from which It flowed. We may also single It out for special honour, as did St. Paul and the Fathers of the Church who so eloquently praised Its redeeming virtue and

also saw in it the source of inspiration for a Christian spirit of self-sacrifice. Christ shed His blood in laying down His life for others, His selfless generosity is fundamental to His saving act.

Father Faber observes that the lives of the saints are replete with devotion to the Precious Blood. Our own St. Catherine of Siena was a great adorer of the Precious Blood, so much so that her last words were "*Sangue...Sangue...Sangue!*". The prayer she composed to the Precious Blood and which she was known to pray frequently on behalf of sinners was recognised to be effective in bringing about conversion. St. Gaspar del Bufalo, the renowned nineteenth century apostle of the Precious Blood and founder of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood used to say that he wished he had a thousand tongues to preach about the power of the Precious Blood for the salvation of all. Perhaps prophetically for own times, St. Gaspar said, "*The chastisements of God are not yet at an end; still more sorrowful times are ahead; and divine justice will be placated by the devotion to the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ.*"

At the turn of the twentieth century, Our Lord appeared to Sr. Mary Martha Chambon of the Monastery of the Visitation in Chambery. He gave her a double mission to adore and invoke the Sacred Wounds unceasingly and to revive this devotion in the hearts of the faithful. In these private revelations, Our Lord said to her:

"The soul who during life has honoured and studied the Wounds of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and has offered them to the Eternal Father for the souls in Purgatory, will be accompanied at the moment of death by the Holy Virgin and the angels; and Our Lord on the Cross all brilliant with glory will receive her and crown her."

Across the centuries, the Church has given shape and sanction to this devotion by approving societies such as the Missionaries of the Precious Blood; enriching confraternities like that of *St. Nicholas in Carcere*, in Rome, and indeed here at the London Oratory; attaching indulgences to prayers and scapulars in honour of the Precious Blood; and establishing commemorative feasts of the Precious Blood. This feast, first celebrated in Spain in the 16th century, was later introduced to Italy by St Gaspar del Bufalo and extended to the whole Church by Blessed Pius IX in 1849.

For many dioceses, there were two days to which the Office of the Precious Blood was assigned, the office being in both cases the same. The reason was that the office was at first granted only to the Fathers of the Most Precious Blood. Later, as one of the offices of the Fridays of Lent, it was assigned to the Friday after the fourth Sunday in Lent. When Pope Pius IX went into exile at Gaeta in 1849, he had as his companion Fr Giovanni Merlini, third superior general of the Fathers of the Most Precious Blood. After they had arrived at Gaeta, Don Merlini suggested that His Holiness make a vow to extend the feast of the Precious Blood to the entire Church, if he would again obtain possession of the Papal dominions. The Pope took the matter under consideration, but a few days later sent his domestic prelate, Mgr Giuseppe Stella to Don Merlini with this message: "*The pope does not deem it expedient to bind himself by a vow; instead His Holiness is pleased to extend the feast immediately to all Christendom.*" This took place on June 30th 1849, the day the French army conquered Rome and the republicans capitulated.

As June 30th that year had been a Saturday before the first Sunday of July, Pope Pius IX decreed on August 10th, 1849, that henceforth every first Sunday of July should be dedicated to the "*Most Precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ.*" This feast was

instituted by him in thanksgiving for the victory of the Papal and French army over the revolutionary forces which had driven him from Rome. Pope Pius XI raised this feast to the rank of Double of the First Class to mark the nineteen hundredth anniversary of Our Lord's death. Pope Pius XII assigned the feast to July 1st in the Roman Calendar of 1954 thus beginning the month dedicated to the Precious Blood. Blessed John XXIII underlined the intrinsic importance of this devotion and its feast in his Apostolic Letter of June 30th 1960: *On Promoting Devotion to the Most Precious Blood*. In that text, he stated, “*The world can still set itself right and always will be able to, because the voice and Blood of Christ cry out for pity and mercy... Devotion to the Precious Blood is the devotion of our time...It is a devotion for all souls, for the whole world. The infinite love of the Saviour is announced in His Name, it is symbolized in His heart, and it is made eloquent in His Blood.*”

These historical details which link the evolution of the devotion and its feast to the power of the papacy are regrettably not without significance for its later development. In the liturgical changes following the Second Vatican Council, the feast was suppressed, the suggestion being that it was somehow incorporated into the *Feast of Sanctissimi Corporis et Sanguinis Christi*, Corpus Christi under another name. This would seem to be a regrettable confusion and exercise in minimalism as the emphasis of that venerable liturgical feast is essentially eucharistic, whereas this feast is more soteriological in its focus. It also expresses the generosity of redemption and reminds us that just as the Israelites of old found protection by placing the blood of the Paschal Lamb on their lintels, we too are rescued by the Precious Blood of which it was a type.

In our own time, we need to see a wider return to this powerful devotion which is so eloquent in expressing all that we understand to be the salvation Christ has won for us. Principally, it reminds us that the Blood of Christ is precious because it is Christ's own great ransom paid for the redemption of mankind. As there was to be no remission of sin without the shedding of blood, the Incarnate Word not only offered His life for the salvation of the world, but he offered to give up His life by a bloody death, and to hang bloodless upon the Cross for the salvation of mankind. There, upon the Cross, He atoned for every form of human sin. “*God was indeed Christ, reconciling the world to Himself.*” He shed His Precious Blood for all - for Jew and Gentile, for heathen and Christian, for the infidel and all unbelievers. The feast of the Precious Blood is also a call to repentance and reparation. It was shed that sinners might be forgiven, that they might live and not die; that they might live unto Him “*in Whom we have redemption through His Blood, the remission of sins*”.

I have no doubt personally that this devotion is potentially the greatest source of consolation and blessing. I leave the last word with St Catherine, in quoting her famous prayer:

*Precious Blood, Ocean of Divine Mercy, flow upon us!
Precious Blood, Most Pure offering, procure for us every grace!
Precious Blood, Hope and refuge of sinners, atone for us!
Precious Blood, Delight of the Holy Souls, draw us! Amen.*

Preached by Fr Andrew Wadsworth at a Missa Cantata celebrated by The Very Revd. Ignatius Harrison, Cong Orat.,
for the Society of St Catherine of Siena in the Little Oratory of the London Oratory
on the Feast of the Most Precious Blood, July 1st, 2008.