

Christianity is a blood religion. Leviticus says that there is no salvation except by blood (17:11), Paul reminds us that we are washed in the blood of the lamb, Jesus sweats blood in His agony in the garden, and Jesus transforms wine into His very blood. Truly, blood is at the heart of our faith.

But there is something fascinating in the uniquely Christian perspective of this. In all religions it has historically been the private self, the little guy, who had to spill his blood, often unwillingly selected as a sacrifice for the sake of others. The Aztecs, for example, killed their own people for human sacrifice. The Canaanites sacrificed their children. The Jews killed animals, ten thousand heifers, twenty thousand goats, thirty thousand bullocks, great round numbers of them. Cultural anthropologists estimate that as much as 90% of the economy of the city of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus had to do with the buying, penning, feeding, herding, and butchering of sacrificial animals and with hauling their dead carcasses out of the temple. Supposedly in all of this, God was pleased. Most other religions likewise forced some spilling of blood in order to be pleasing before God.

In Christianity, however, in the person of Jesus, for the first time, the process was turned completely around. Here we had the center, God-in-Jesus spilling HIS blood FOR THE SAKE OF US! God was spilling the blood, God was opening His heart, so He could reach out to all of the little ones, the sinners, the outcasts, the poor, the needy, the lost and broken. In the living of this truth, the Catholic Church has created images like the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and religious orders named after 'The Precious Blood,' 'The Passion,' in recognition of this newfound understanding.

And herein lies the great mystery that we celebrate in these three sacred days – that through the blood of Christ, we have been redeemed. There is a transforming union between God and us, the beloved and the lover. And there is a price on both sides, but it is paid first by God. And because God knows we won't understand it conceptually, He does it visually and historically. God became incarnate. God became a human being and walked the journey and ended up alone, bleeding at night, sweating blood in the Garden, and the next day He poured out His blood on the cross. This has a transformative power on the soul – perhaps largely unconsciously. It's hard to wrap our minds around a love so immense, so willing to go to any lengths to save us, to even shed blood and die.

The image we have given to this Jesus who bleeds is the Lamb of God. In the Book of Revelation, chapters 4-6, the lamb is slain yet victorious. There is related imagery in the Book of Exodus (12:1-4) – the first reading we just heard. In the Exodus story, the Israelites were told to go out to the fields and pick a perfect lamb. They were to bring it into their house on the tenth day of Nisan. I never really paid much attention to this little detail, and I always missed the point. They were to hold the lamb in the house for 4 days; then, on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of Nisan, they were to kill it. But think about this for a moment. If you have a lamb in the house for 4 days, not only your kids but you yourself are likely to have fallen in love with it. It's a family pet after 4 days! And it has to be killed! The symbolism screams at us – the pure and innocent and the last thing you would ever want to give up, has to be killed.

The lamb that is sacrificed symbolically represents the part of our life that we will find every justification for holding on to and not spilling blood over. My wife can't be the one to die. My child can't be sick or handicapped. My job can't be the one to be downsized. My health can't be compromised. I can't be faced with a long and debilitating illness. We can't be the couple who cannot conceive children. The trauma that comes to force us to re-align ourselves with God, will always feel like a lamb that's slain. That which is

asked to die will always seem good, that part of ourselves that we have to give up usually looks innocent and necessary for our well-being.

The Paschal Mystery says, in enthroning the slain and victorious lamb at the altar, that this is the only way through, that there is no salvation without the shedding of blood, without sacrifice, without pain, without our giving up. Lent annually reminds us of this when we are asked to give things up, to make some kind of sacrifices in our lives. But this Holy Week reminds us that God-in-Christ did this first. He gave up everything – His godhead, heaven, His divine power, His blood, His very life – for us – so that we could be saved. But the message we must eventually integrate as His followers is that we must do the same. (Adapted from Rohr, QUEST FOR THE GRAIL, p. 134-135)

Second, this is the central faith notion of sacrifice. Sacrum, holy, facere, to make holy. Sacrifice makes things holy. We somehow know this intuitively. We can SAY we love someone, but until we are willing to give something up for them – our time, our comfort, our money, our wants or desires, it remains largely empty words. This is easily seen in marriage and perhaps easiest to see in the wonderful way so many of you exercise your vocations as parents. You sacrifice on a daily basis for your children – and you do so gladly because you love them. For the money you spend on a kid in their lifetime you could have a vacation house! A year or 2 of college would give you a swimming pool! But who wants a house or a pool when you can have something of deeper, lasting and true value? Who wants stuff when you can invest in a life, a future, a LOVE? The old marriage instruction used to say “sacrifice is always difficult and irksome; only love can make it easy – and perfect love can make it a joy.” Love always entails sacrifice. Jesus first demonstrated this, and then thousand saints throughout the centuries have given us an example to imitate.

A story and example to conclude. It was Auschwitz, and the evening was July 30, 1941. The Nazis had discovered that a prisoner had escaped from cellblock 14. In reprisal, the commandant ordered that 10 prisoners be locked up and starved to death. Ten men were selected. When the selection was completed, one man, a 40-year-old Polish Army sergeant, broke down, “My wife and my children”! he cried.

As they were about to be led off, a Franciscan priest, Father Maximilian Kolbe, stepped forward and made this request of the commandant. “I want to die in place of this prisoner,” he said, “I have no wife or children, besides, I’m old and not good for anything.”

“Request granted,” the commandant snapped.

Father Kolbe and the others were kept in a starvation bunker. For 16 days, Father Kolbe led the condemned men in prayer and hymns as one by one they died. On August 14, the last 4, including Father Kolbe, were put to death by lethal injection.

Thirty years later, a survivor of Auschwitz described the effect of Father Kolbe’s sacrifice:

“It was an enormous shock to the whole camp. We became aware that someone among us in this spiritual dark night of the soul was raising the standard of love on high. Someone unknown, like everyone else, tortured and bereft of name and social standing, went to a horrible death for the sake of someone not even related to him. Therefore, it is not true, we cried, that humanity is cast down and trampled in the mud, overcome by oppressors, and overwhelmed by hopelessness. Thousands of prisoners were convinced the true world continued to exist and that our torturers would not be able to destroy it.

“To say that Father Kolbe died for us or for that person’s family is too great a simplification.....His death was the salvation of thousands.....a shock full of hope, regenerating and giving strength; we were stunned by

his act, which became for us a mighty explosion of light in a dark camp.” (slightly adapted from CONNECTIONS, July 1995, p. 3 – taken from A BOOK OF SAINTS, by Anne Gordon).

Blood. Sacrifice. Life given. Lives saved. Salvation assured. “There is no greater love than this – than to lay down’ one’s life for one’s friends. Love one another as I have loved you.” Amen.

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