

## **The 2010 Precious Blood Convocation and the Laity A Testimonial by Frank J. Niemas**

“What is the Precious Blood Convocation?” “Why is it being held?” “Why am I being asked to help in the planning, and how can I contribute?” These were the questions going through my mind when I was asked to join the Convocation Planning Committee in early 2007.

I have now been involved in the planning for the Convocation for over two years and I am learning the answers to my questions. Some of the answers were relatively straight-forward, while others have caused me to reflect, learn and grow (a slow, continuous process for me, often accompanied by a little bit of uncertainty and anxiety)!

First, came the easier questions...

The official title of this event is “The Precious Blood Convocation.” It is, in simpler terms, a congress of Precious Blood Congregations in North America. This is the fourth congress in recent years, organized by the Precious Blood Leadership Conference, representing seven Precious Blood Congregations, encompassing priests, sisters, brothers, amici and lay associates of the various congregations. By now, all members of the various congregations have seen the publicity for the Convocation and know the basic information. The Convocation will be held July 26 – 29, 2010, at St. Louis University in St. Louis, Missouri. The theme of the Convocation is “Who will speak the word to rouse them? I can, I must, I will. Will you?”

At this point, I can also answer why it is being held. The words are easy now but they came only after months of meeting, reflection, prayer and discernment by the planning committee. Again, the words can be found in the press releases. The Convocation has a three-fold-design:

- To deepen our understanding of Precious Blood theology
- To witness to the Gospel
- To embrace the anguish of the church and the world with redeeming love

The words mean different things to each of us depending upon our personal stories and our relationships to the Precious Blood Congregations.

The most difficult and challenging question for me was the last question, “Why am I being asked to help in the planning, and how can I contribute?” My journey with the planning committee is helping me to answer this question and I want to share it because this question may also be in the minds of the lay people who are a part of the Precious Blood Congregations. It may answer questions and concerns that lay members may have regarding their participation in the Convocation; hopefully, it will also lead to strong participation from our lay members.

As a companion of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood - Cincinnati Province, my role on the planning committee is to be a representative of the lay people in the Precious Blood Congregations who have been touched by Precious Blood Spirituality and who have been drawn to more active participation within a Precious Blood congregation. In my case, my Precious Blood journey began in 1973 as a parishioner at St. Andrew’s Church in Orlando, FL, which has been entrusted to the care of the CPPS priests since its founding in 1957. There was

something special about St. Andrew and the priests and the people there. At first I was unaware of what that something special was. I knew nothing about “CPPS,” or St. Gaspar, or “Precious Blood Spirituality.” I just felt a special spirit within the community, marked by welcoming and hospitality. There was a strong involvement of the laity in all the parish activities which was encouraged by our Precious Blood priests. Most striking was the diversity in our community – people of all backgrounds, races, ethnicities worshiping and working together. I just knew that the special spirit within our parish was calling me, changing my attitudes, challenging me, and changing my life, in ways both big and small.

About 15 years ago, my wife and I became Precious Blood Companions with the Cincinnati Province. Slowly, we came to understand that it was the spirit and work of St. Gaspar that had a lot to do with the strength and vitality of our parish. I came to understand more about the gift of Precious Blood Spirituality. And circumstances in my life as well as my exposure to Precious Blood Spirituality came together to change my attitudes, such as my attitude toward the death penalty, to more of an awareness of the need of social justice and an appreciation for the need of reconciliation, both within the church and in my daily life. I grew up in the 50’s and 60’s, when homosexuality was not discussed and was even covered up. In my own life, I have been blessed to know close family members and friends who are gay. I see the goodness in them, their hunger for God (which is present in all of us, regardless of sexual orientation). The issues within the church, the feeling that many gay people have that they are not welcome in my Church, are no longer just abstractions to me. The anguish over this issue, the desire to be an agent of change, acceptance, and reconciliation are part of my journey now.

After more than 50 years, in July 2008, St. Andrew Parish lost the care of the CPPS priests who are no longer able to staff the parish. I feel deeply the loss of the priests and it has been and still is a painful situation as our parish is struggling. Many of us feel the call to keep Precious Blood Spirituality alive in our parish. In my own diocese, I see controversy, strife and discouragement, and I struggle to try to make a difference. And yet, I feel (and I am probably right) that I am still just taking baby steps on my journey. And I wonder, what can I do, how can I possibly contribute? With these feelings, I joined the Convocation Planning Committee with some apprehension. My fellow committee members were priests, brothers, sisters and lay people who, by background and education, were far more qualified than I. There were theologians, educators, social workers and liturgists on the committee. Even the word “theology” was intimidating to me. And while, maybe, my heart was in the right place, I really wondered what I could possibly contribute to the committee. I had none of the qualifications of the other members. I had no formal religious training (beyond my exposure to the Baltimore Catechism!) My degree is in engineering! I am semi-retired. My experience in serving others is as a son, husband, father, grandfather and friend as well as through various ministries in the church – would that be enough?

I found an answer in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 12, especially verse 7, which states, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” I see the reading as a call to all members of the body of Christ to share their gifts, especially the unique gift of self, which each of us is called to share. More importantly, I have found an answer in the spirit of welcoming, openness, and acceptance which I have felt from all of my fellow committee members (and now, friends.) Sometimes I felt it by words, as when Sr. Marie smiles at me and says, “I’m so glad you’re here,” but just as often, I feel the Precious Blood hospitality through all that the committee does, especially in the ways disagreements and differences of opinion are solved in a spirit of cooperation. So, for me, the question of how I can contribute has been answered.

For me, I cannot be a theologian, liturgist, etc., but that's OK because God has provided those gifts in abundance on our committee. All I can give is the gift of myself: my hopes, my concerns, my experiences on my own Precious Blood journey. However small my gifts are, I need to trust that the Spirit will allow me to contribute to the work of our committee and of the body written about in Corinthians. As I continue to work with the committee, I also see how much I have been gifted by this opportunity. I have been inspired by each of my fellow committee members. I have learned of the richness and diversity in the Precious Blood Congregations and how each congregation has its own unique perspective on Precious Blood Spirituality but still has so much in common with all the other groups. My participation in the work of the planning committee and in participation in the Convocation itself will challenge me, stretch me, and bring about growth. I cannot fully explain it yet but, as in the past, my association with Precious Blood people will change my life. Of that, I am sure!

I am sharing my story because, perhaps, there are other people, especially lay people, who have the same questions and concerns about participating in the Convocation as I have. Perhaps you have not considered attending. But, perhaps you are called to be there.

I would ask you to prayerfully consider these questions:

What has Precious Blood Spirituality meant in my life?

- What are the issues in my church and in the world that have touched me in a special way on my journey?
- How am I being called to make a difference – what are my gifts?

As you reflect on these questions, and also on 1 Corinthians 12, perhaps you will be called to consider attending the Convocation. If you do, I believe you will be gifted and, in turn, your presence and participation will be a gift to the other participants.

I hope you will “meet me in St. Louis”!