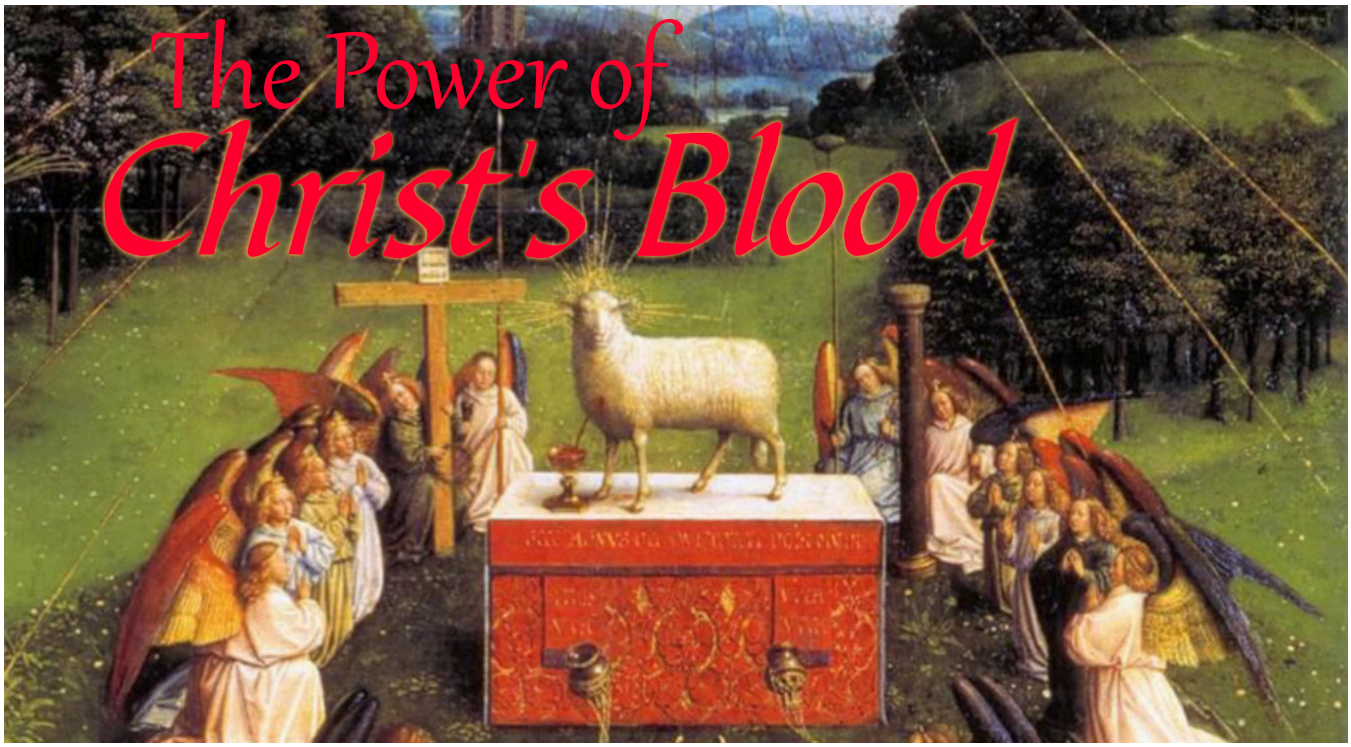
The Power of Christ's Blood



The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb from the Ghent Altarpiece by Jan van Eyck. c. 1432

The great events we are contemplating in these days, the events of the Paschal mystery, the passion, death, and resurrection of our Lord, were foreshadowed and prepared for in the time of the Old Testament.

One of the most important preparations and of Christ's passion and death is that of the celebration of the Passover instituted by Moses at the time of the Exodus. The Passover was a family feast. It was a ritual that was not celebrated in the Temple, but at home. It was within the environment and security of the home that one partook of the Paschal lamb. The blood of the lamb was sprinkled on the doorposts and the lintel of the house. It was this blood that kept the family safe from the destroying angel that went forth to slay all the first born of Egypt. It was the blood of the lamb that saved those in the house from the forces of chaos and darkness and destruction. This feast was celebrated every year; every year the Israelites needed to call to mind and to reenact this event because the hostile forces that threatened them with dissolution never ceased to press upon them.

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This foreshadowing of the Paschal Mystery that we find in the Passover, provides us with a striking image of our own situation in the world. We are also surrounded by hostile forces that threaten to destroy us and bring us to ruin. We find hostile forces both outside and within ourselves. One of the most destructive forces outside of us that we find in the modern world are the forces that threaten the human mind. False philosophies and false ideologies abound and are wreaking havoc in many peoples' lives. How many of us know young adults who have left for college

with their faith intact and with a sense of right and wrong and who, four years later, have lost their faith and have adopted the norms of a world that has lost its moral compass? The human mind is easily led into error. Even those who profess to live a Christian life are often affected by the errors of modern philosophy which have shaped much of our culture.

Besides the hostile forces we find outside ourselves, we also have to reckon with the destructive forces we find within. There is the constant struggle to keep our unruly passions in check and to keep them from overwhelming us. Most of us have daily struggles with fear, anxiety, anger or sadness.

Surrounded as we are by these forces of darkness, is there any place where we can find security in this world? Is there any place where we will find ourselves protected from the hostile forces that are both outside and inside us?

Maïti Girtanner
(1922–2014)

There is only one place we can find security in this life: within the home of the Church, protected by the blood of the lamb. The blood of Christ has power. It is the power of divine love which is stronger than any evil in the world. In the psalms we read: "In the shadow of Thy wings I will take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by" (Ps. 57:2). The Fathers of the Church understood this image of wings in this psalm to refer to the arms of our Lord, stretched out on the Cross.

I recently read an account of a woman's life which illustrates, in a rather dramatic way, the power of the Cross of Christ and how it protects us from the forces that threaten to destroy us. The woman's name was Maïti Girtanner.

Maïti was born in 1922. Her mother was French and her father Swiss and so she knew both French and German. Her father died when she was four years old and her widowed mother moved to Paris to raise her two children. The family of Maïti's mother was gifted musically and Maïti became an accomplished pianist. Before the German occupation of France, Maite's family had moved out of Paris to a town which bordered what became the Free Zone after the German occupation.

Maïti became involved with the French resistance. With her knowledge of German and the fact that she gave piano recitals to the elite German officers, she was well positioned to gather information and intercede for many who were arrested. She saved many lives by assisting their escape to freedom. But eventually her activities were discovered by the Gestapo and she was arrested in October of 1943.

She was sent to a prison where there were about two dozen other prisoners. They were subjected to a refined method of torture which was devised and supervised by a young medical doctor. The torture consisted in the methodical cudgeling of the base of the spinal column. Outwardly, there was little to show, but terrible damage was wrought internally. The blows effected the spinal cord and the central nervous system. Each session left Maïti in debilitating pain and she underwent a physical suffering beyond what she could have imagined possible. She saw some of her companions die as a result of this treatment; at least one committed suicide. By February of 1944, she was no longer able to stand and she was close to death herself. She was saved by a rescue mission sponsored by the Swiss Red Cross. She was hospitalized and given treatment, but the harm done to her body was beyond repair and she lived the rest of her life in severe chronic pain.

Given her physical condition, she knew she would be unable to marry and have a family. She was unable to return to the piano. She occupied her time

by tutoring at home and engaged in charitable work which was part of her life as a third order Dominican. One can imagine that, in such a situation, with the prospect of a normal life ruined, Maïti would have been strongly tempted to self-pity and devouring anger. But Maïti was a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. She determined early on that she would not make a tragedy of her life. While she was in prison she testified to her faith and the strength it gave her. She spoke of eternity. The example of Christ sustained her. She assumed responsibility not only for herself and her fellow prisoners but also for her captors. She did her best to pray for her torturers and especially for the doctor who supervised their cruelty.

In an interview shortly before she died she testified that her way of wishing the doctor to be saved "was to wish no less to vanquish the evil I carried in me, of which I myself was an accomplice"[1]. One of her great concerns and struggles after the War was to come to a place of forgiveness. It was something that she admitted did not happen overnight, but involved a long interior battle. Often it is difficult to know whether we have really forgiven. She was unexpectedly given the opportunity to see whether she had been given that grace.

In 1984, she was contacted by the doctor who had designed the torture that had ruined her life. He had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and he greatly feared his approaching death. He remembered what Maïti had said about eternity and wanted to know: is it true? He visited her and the visit gave him the opportunity to ask for her pardon and she was given the opportunity to grant it. She was in great pain that day, reclining on a couch, and when he bowed down to her, she took his head between her hands and kissed him on the forehead. "It was a gesture, she later insisted, that was unpremeditated but 'could not, not have been'. Having seen her pardon confirmed, she remarked: 'Afterwards, one is no longer the same.' We have her word that her visitor was likewise changed"[2]. Such accounts of Christian forgiveness leave us with the impression of something divine breaking into our world. They manifest to us the power of the Cross of Christ.

Have we experienced the power of the Cross of Christ in our lives? Has the blood of Christ, in fact, kept the destructive and hostile forces that threaten us from harming and overwhelming us? Sometimes those who are striving to live a good Christian life will ask about some habitual fault or sin they are struggling with and cannot seem to overcome. They want to know why God's grace seems unable to free them. And so I ask them: why don't you give up the fight? Why do you keep struggling? What gives you the strength to stand up again after a fall and keep going? Where does this strength and resolve come from? It comes from the Cross of Jesus Christ.

The blood of Christ was sprinkled on the doorposts of our souls at Baptism. The blood of Christ is sprinkled on our souls every time we worthily receive Holy Communion. The blood of Christ is applied to our souls every time we make an honest and sincere confession. The blood of Christ is much more powerful than all the forces of darkness and destruction. As long as we remain united to the blood of Christ, we are safe from all the dark forces that threaten us and nothing can ultimately harm us. ✣

[1] Erik Varden, *The Shattering of Loneliness*, p. 102

[2] Ibid., p. 104.