



The Power of the Blood of Jesus

Tracing the blood of Jesus through sacred scripture

By Deacon Tim Sullivan

Introduction

On July 2, 1988, at a Marriage and Family Life Conference in Steubenville, Ohio, I had a profound, dramatic experience of God's presence in me. This experience was very powerful and changed my life. I wasn't asking for this. I didn't know anything about such experiences.

The next day, a Sunday, as I heard the Scriptures being read aloud at Mass, the words came alive for me in a way that they never had before. I realized that in addition to revealing Himself to me the night before, God had given me another gift. It was a hunger to know God's word, to know the Bible. And, He had given me a sense of some of the themes of the Bible.

After this experience, the meaning of many passages in Scripture would resonate so deeply within me that at times I would be moved to tears. As time went by, I had other mystical experiences. I began to study the Bible daily. As I read, I fell more deeply in love with Jesus and with my Catholic faith.

In this booklet, I want to share with you a major theme that runs throughout the Bible and in a sense ties the whole Bible together. This theme is the power of the Blood of Jesus. I hope this presentation will give you a newer and richer understanding of the blood and how the theme of the blood is developed in the Bible. I believe it will enrich your life as a Christian. And, if you are Catholic, it is going to add to your understanding and appreciation for the Eucharist, the real presence of the Body and Blood of Jesus.

Let's start with a prayer: Lord, Jesus, we ask You to send us the Holy Spirit as we read and reflect on this presentation. Infuse Your sacred word with Your

power. Help Your word come alive in our minds and hearts. We pray that through this teaching the power of Your blood will have a new richness, a new impact in the lives of the faithful. By the power of the Blood of Jesus, by the power of His cross, by the power of His holy name. Amen.

We are going to go through the Bible, starting with the Book of Genesis and ending with the Book of Revelation. We will take most of the scriptural passages in sequence. It's a slight exaggeration, but I like to tell people that in this lesson they will learn everything they need to know about the Bible in 15 minutes. It's not that simple, or even that short, but the lesson does work its way through much of the Bible and is a unifying theme that captures the essence of the Bible message and of Christian life.

So let's get started. We'll begin with the first book in the Bible, the Book of Genesis, Chapter 4, verses 8-10, from the story of Cain and Abel:

8 Cain said to his brother, Abel, "Let us go out in the field." When they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. 9 Then the Lord asked Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He answered, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" 10 The Lord then said, "What have you done! Listen: your brother's blood cries out to me from the soil!"

The question Cain asks God is a passage we are all familiar with:

"Am I my brother's keeper?"

But listen to the Lord's response in verse 10:

"The Lord then said, "What have you done? Listen: your brother's blood cries out to me from the soil!"

For us modern Americans, we have to stop and think a lot about those words: “Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the soil!” We have to meditate on them. What does that mean: “Abel’s blood crying out from the soil?” Shakespeare was so overwhelmed by this passage that he used it in many of his tragedies. We have to think of the situation. We think of Abel in the field with his brother. He turns around, and there is his brother Cain coming after him. What was Abel thinking? Surely he was thinking, “Cain, what have I done to you? I’m your brother. I love you.” He almost would have wept to see his brother come at him for no reason, with some kind of weapon, to kill him.

So Abel dies, and his blood is crying, screaming, out from the ground, begging for understanding. The cry of Abel, the shrill cry of his blood for appeasement, for justice, for an explanation, is not just his cry, but it’s also the cry of all the oppressed people in the world: the starving, the neglected, the abused, the poor, the aborted babies.

And so a fundamental question for every Jew or Christian is this: “Can you hear the cry of Abel’s blood? Can you hear the cry of the blood, the cry of those in the world who are in desperate need?” It seems that no one is listening. No one cares. No one is responding.

This is the first clue, early in the text of the Bible, in the first book, that God is going to respond to Abel’s blood crying out to Him from the ground. He hears that cry.

We now turn briefly to the story of Noah and the great flood. At the beginning of the passage in Genesis which describes the flood, God enters into a covenant with Noah:

*Genesis 9:1, 3-4: 1 God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them: Be fertile and multiply and fill the earth... 3 Any living creature that moves about shall be yours to eat; I give them all to you as I did the green plants. 4 **Only meat with its lifeblood still in it you shall not eat.***

We will see in the Book of Leviticus more about this concept of the blood of living creatures.

The next passage we will consider is in Genesis 17. We’ll start with this question: What was the sign of God’s covenant with the Jews? The answer: circumcision. Once again, we have to stop and think, “What is this all about? Why would removing the foreskin from the Jewish male sex organ be a sign of God’s covenant with the Jewish people?”

In Genesis, Chapter 17, verses 9-14, God says to Abraham:

9 God said to Abraham: For your part, you and your descendants after you must keep my covenant throughout the ages. 10 This is the covenant between me and you and your descendants after you that you must keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 Circumcise the flesh of your foreskin. That will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. 12 Throughout the ages, every male among you, when he is eight days old, shall be circumcised, including houseborn slaves and those acquired with money from any foreigner who is not of your descendants. 13 Yes, both the houseborn slaves and those acquired with money must be circumcised. Thus my covenant will be in your flesh as an everlasting covenant. 14 If a male is uncircumcised, that is, if the flesh of his foreskin has not been cut away, such a one will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

What is the significance of circumcising the male when he is eight days old? Well, God created the world and rested in seven days, so the eighth day is a symbolic way of referring to a new creation, a new time, a new covenant with His people. It’s interesting that, in Judaism, the rabbi performing the circumcision is required to extract at least one drop of blood from the male penis. That drop of blood connects Jewish men with their brother, Abel, whose blood spilled on the ground cries out for appeasement, cries out for justice.

Our next encounter with the theme of the blood in the Old Testament is in Chapter 12 of the Book of Exodus, verses 1-14, where God gives to Moses the ritual of the Passover:

1The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: 2 This month

will stand at the head of your calendar; you will reckon it the first month of the year. ³Tell the whole community of Israel: On the tenth of this month every family must procure for itself a lamb, one apiece for each household. ⁴If a household is too small for a lamb, it along with its nearest neighbor will procure one, and apportion the lamb's cost* in proportion to the number of persons, according to what each household consumes. ⁵Your lamb must be a year-old male and without blemish. You may take it from either the sheep or the goats. ⁶You will keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, and then, with the whole community of Israel assembled, it will be slaughtered during the evening twilight. ⁷They will take some of its blood and apply it to the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸They will consume its meat that same night, eating it roasted with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹Do not eat any of it raw or even boiled in water, but roasted, with its head and shanks and inner organs. ¹⁰You must not keep any of it beyond the morning; whatever is left over in the morning must be burned up. ¹¹This is how you are to eat it: with your loins girt, sandals on your feet and your staff in hand, you will eat it in a hurry. It is the LORD's Passover. ¹²For on this same night I will go through Egypt, striking down every firstborn in the land, human being and beast alike, and executing judgment on all the gods of Egypt—I, the LORD! ¹³But for you the blood will mark the houses where you are. Seeing the blood, I will pass over you; thereby, when I strike the land of Egypt, no destructive blow will come upon you. ¹⁴This day will be a day of remembrance for you, which your future generations will celebrate with pilgrimage to the LORD; you will celebrate it as a perpetual institution.

In other words, with respect to the last verse, the Jews are to celebrate the Passover ritual until the end of time. This is not a temporary exercise.

Next, we will turn to the Book of Leviticus, the book of Laws in the Old Testament, Chapter 17, verses 10-14:

10 And if anyone, whether of the house of Israel or of the aliens residing among them, partakes of any blood, I will set myself against that one who partakes of the blood and will cut him off from among his people, 11 since the life of a living body is in its blood, I have made you put it on

the altar, so that atonement may thereby be made for your own lives, because it is the blood, as the seat of life, that makes atonement. 12 That is why I have told the Israelites: No one among you, not even a resident alien, may partake of blood. 13 Anyone hunting, whether of the Israelites or of the aliens residing among them, who catches an animal or a bird that may be eaten, shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. 14 Since the life of every living body is its blood, I have told the Israelites: You shall not partake of the blood of any meat. Since the life of every living body is its blood, anyone who partakes of it shall be cut off.

What does this mean, that “The life of a living body is in its blood?” In the Jewish world and much of the known world at that time, it was believed that somehow the blood of a living being contained the essence of that being's existence. It contained a person's very identity. A person's very being was somehow captured in his blood. This passage is saying that a person should never eat the blood of an animal because an animal is a lower form of life. If a person consumed the blood of an animal, he would be merging his life with that of an animal, taking into his life a lower form of being. This explains why we have kosher meat: the blood has been drained from the animal before it can be consumed.

At this time in history, when the Book of Leviticus was written, there would have been a common understanding of a blood covenant. A blood covenant would have been used to bring about a treaty between two warring peoples. Here is how it would have worked. If there were two groups of people who had been fighting each other for years, and neither side had really gained much of an advantage from the fighting, the leaders of the two sides might have met to make peace, to enter into a treaty. They would have sealed this treaty with a blood covenant. A representative from each of the two sides would come forward and drain some of their blood into a single cup. Then, in front of all their troops, each one of the leaders would have drunk blood from that single cup. Given the fact that at that time there was a common understanding that the life of a being, his very essence, was contained in his blood, this ritual would have signified in the most powerful way possible that, from the moment that the ritual was performed, the lives of the two groups were now merged together. Whatever happened to one group from that moment on might as well have happened to the other group. The

understanding would have been: “Whatever someone does to you, they do to us. If you suffer, we suffer, too, because our lives are now joined together. They are now fused together in the most intimate, complete and powerful way possible.” This is how a blood covenant would have been understood in those days.

Moving on to the Book of Zechariah, there is a prophetic phrase in Chapter 12, verse 10. The prophet says, speaking for God:

10 I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and petition; and they shall look on him whom they have pierced through, and they shall mourn for him as one mourns for an only son, and they shall grieve him as one grieves over a first-born.

And then from Zechariah 13:1 and 6:

*1 On that day there shall be open to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem a fountain to purify from sin and uncleanness...
6 And if anyone asks him, “What are these wounds on your chest?” he shall answer, “With these I was wounded in the house of my dear ones.”*

Keep these passages in mind, as they will be connected with later passages in the Bible.

Keeping in mind what was said earlier about the significance of blood in the Jewish tradition and the common understanding regarding a blood covenant, we move forward into the New Testament, into the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus gives the notion of a blood covenant a whole new dimension, a whole new meaning. We will start with Matthew 26:17:

On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples approached Jesus and said, “Where do you want us to prepare to eat the Passover.”

It’s obvious that they are going to follow the Passover ritual set forth in Exodus 12, which we looked at earlier. Now we will turn to Matthew 26:26-

29:

26 While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, “Take and eat; this is my body.” 27 Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you, 28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins. 29 I tell you, from now on I shall not drink this fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it with you new in the kingdom of my Father.”

In saying, “Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant,” Jesus would have known that the apostles had a specific understanding of the meaning of the blood and of a blood covenant, that the blood contained the life of a person, the essence of a person’s being. They would have understood the depth and richness of what He was saying. They also would have been shocked at what He was doing, giving them His blood to drink, offering the gift of Himself and telling them that from now on their lives will be merged together in the most intimate, most powerful way.

Jesus also told the apostles, “Do this in memory of me.” Luke 22:19 God told Moses in the Book of Exodus that the Passover meal was to be a perpetual institution. Now Jesus has given a new element, a new power, to the Passover ritual. The wine in the Passover ritual has now become the blood of Jesus. Jesus has made it possible for the Apostles and all who followed them until the end of time to consume His blood, to literally take Jesus into their own beings. Through what Jesus did at the Passover meal, the human and divine could now be fused together in the new blood covenant.

In the Mass of the Catholic Church, which is based upon the Passover ritual, after the reading of the Gospel, bread, wine and water are brought forward. The wine, signifying Christ, is poured into a chalice. A few drops of water, signifying the faithful who are present, are added to the wine in the cup. Then, the priest asks that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the wine mingled with the few drops of water become the blood of Jesus Christ. Catholics believe that this prayer is heard and that the Holy Spirit comes upon these gifts and turns the wine with a bit of water into the blood of Jesus. Accordingly, the Catholic belief is that, when a Catholic who is properly

disposed drinks from the cup, that person receives the blood of Jesus. We participate in the blood covenant. Because the life of a living body is in its blood, the essence of Jesus, what makes Him what and who He is, is taken into the bodies of believing Catholics. Our lives are merged with His in the most powerful way possible. At the same time, in a lesser but very real and meaningful way, our lives are joined with those of other members of the faithful, our brothers and sisters in Christ. The Eucharistic ritual has an astoundingly unifying impact.

We now turn to John 6:53-56:

53 Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you do not have life within you. 54 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. 55 For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. 56 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.

Jesus has given to all of humanity who choose to accept it this amazing gift of His blood, His very essence, which He has poured out for us. He says, in effect, "Drink of this, become one with me through this blood covenant, and I will change your life forever. Through my presence in you, your sins will be overcome and you will obtain your salvation."

At the end of the Gospel of John, we read of the crucifixion of Jesus in Chapter 19, verses 32-34:

32 So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and then of the other one who was crucified with Jesus. 33 But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs, 34 but one soldier thrust his lance into his side, and immediately blood and water flowed out.

This is where the passage that we read in Zechariah, which refers to the "fountain, which purifies" is fulfilled. The fountain of blood and water pouring out from the crucified body of Jesus, from His side, from His heart, is the "fountain which purifies." The water from the side of Jesus is

the purifying water of Baptism, and the blood from His side is the saving, sacrificial blood of Jesus, which is available in and through the Eucharist of the Catholic Church.

The Church baptizes. The Church brings us the true blood of Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, we read:

16 The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? 17 Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

"The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?" The word "participation" isn't really adequate. It's a weak attempt to capture a deep concept in English. The meaning is that we become one with Jesus and with each other. We become immersed in the life of Christ, the sufferings of Christ. Our lives become joined to His in the most intimate, most powerful way possible. And so, in the next chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 12, at verse 26, Paul writes, in his description of the Body of Christ:

If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy.

This is the meaning of the blood covenant, similar to the old understanding in ancient times when a blood covenant was used to ritualize the resolution of a conflict, but now brought to a new level of meaning by Jesus. Now, in the new blood covenant, we can actually become united with God. By the grace of this union, by the grace of God's presence in us, if one of us suffers, then everyone else in the body of Christ suffers as well, because we are all linked to one another in Christ. And, because this suffering is united with the suffering of Jesus, human suffering can share in the healing power of the passion of Christ. Our trials and challenges are raised to a new level. They have a new, supernatural value. Symbolically placed on the altar, our sufferings become joined with those of Jesus and bless the other members of the Body of Christ.

The Letter to the Hebrews speaks eloquently of the power of the blood of Christ in Chapter 9, verses 11 to 15 and 24 to 26 and Chapter 10, verses 19 to 25:

11 But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that have come to be, passing through the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made by hands, that is, not belonging to this creation, 12 he entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of a heifer's ashes can sanctify those who are defiled so that their flesh is cleansed, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from dead works to worship the living God. 15 For this reason he is mediator of a new covenant: since a death has taken place for deliverance from transgressions under the first covenant, those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance... 24 For Christ did not enter into a sanctuary made by hands, a copy of the true one, but heaven itself; that he might now appear before God on our behalf. 25 Not that he might offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters each year into the sanctuary with blood that is not his own; 26 if that were so, he would have had to suffer repeatedly from the foundation of the world. But now once for all he has appeared at the end of the ages to take away sin by his sacrifice.*

Hebrews 10:19-25

19 Therefore, brothers, since through the blood of Jesus we have confidence of entrance into the sanctuary 20 by the new and living way he opened for us through the veil, that is, his flesh, 21 and since we have "a great priest over the house of God," 22 let us approach with a sincere heart and in absolute trust, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water. 23 Let us hold unwaveringly to our confession that gives us hope, for he who made the promise is trustworthy. 24 We must consider how to rouse one another to love and good works. 25 We should not stay away from our assembly, as is the custom of some, but encourage one another, and this all the

more as you see the day drawing near.

Note: Here, in verse 25, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews is referring to the Eucharistic assembly.

Finally, in Hebrews 12:22-24, we are taken back to Genesis, to where we started our discussion:

*22 No, you have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and countless angels in festal gathering, 23 and the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, and God the judge of all, and the spirits of the just made perfect, 24 **and Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and the sprinkled blood that speaks more eloquently than that of Abel.***

The Circle has now been completed. The blood of Abel cries out from the ground for appeasement, for satisfaction, for justice. Jesus, hearing the cry of Abel, responds to that cry by allowing His own blood to be poured out on the ground. The blood of Jesus is the perfect, saving response to the cry of Abel's blood. God heard that cry and sent His own Son to respond to it. Jesus hears and responds to the cry of all the oppressed, all of the victims of man's inhumanity. He knows what it is like to suffer. On the cross, He saw people that He created taunting Him, spitting at Him, cursing Him, crucifying Him. He gazed at these very people that He loved so much, and it was like Abel seeing his own brother coming at him with a weapon. We can imagine the thoughts of Abel and Jesus: "What are you doing? Why are you doing this? What have I done? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

In the 2nd Century, St. Irenaeus and Melito of Sardis both wrote that Abel prefigured the passion of Christ. St. Cyprian, writing in the 3rd Century, connected the sacrifice of Abel with the passion of Jesus. He wrote, "With reason did he [Abel], who was such in respect of God's sacrifice, become subsequently himself a sacrifice to God; so that he who first set forth martyrdom, and initiated the Lord's passion by the glory of his blood, had both the Lord's righteousness and his peace." Methodius of Olympus, in the 4th Century, stated very poetically, "Abel, clearly prefiguring Thy

death, O blessed One, with flowing blood, and eyes lifted up to heaven, said: ‘Cruelly slain by a brother’s hand.’”

In the Book of Revelation, John describes a vision that he has of heaven. We will pay particular attention to Chapter 7, verses 9 to 14:

9 After this I had a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue. They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. 10 They cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation comes from our God, who is seated on the throne, and from the Lamb.” 11 All the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They prostrated themselves before the throne, worshiped God, 12 and exclaimed: “Amen. Blessing and glory, wisdom and thanksgiving, honor, power, and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen.” 13 Then one of the elders spoke up and said to me, “Who are these wearing white robes, and where did they come from?” 14 I said to him, “My lord, you are the one who knows.” He said to me, “These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

This is the challenge for each of us, to appropriate the blood of the Lamb that Jesus offers us.

There is one passage that captures in a special way the challenge of this teaching on the power of the blood of Jesus, the blood covenant. It is in Matthew, Chapter 20, verses 20-22, when the mother of James and John is with Jesus and her sons:

20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee approached him with her sons and did him homage, wishing to ask him for something. 21 He said to her, “What do you wish?” She answered him, “Command that these two sons of mine sit, one at your right and the other at your left, in your kingdom.” 22 Jesus said in reply, “You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?” They said to him, “We can.”

This is a bottom line question for each Christian. First of all, do we hear the cry of Abel’s blood? Do we hear the cry of those who are oppressed? Of those who are suffering? Starving? Homeless? Abused? Neglected? Aborted? Do we hear this cry whether it comes from our own country or from the far side of the world? If we hear this cry, are we willing to drink from the cup, to give of ourselves to respond to the cry? We are incapable of responding to this cry without God’s grace.

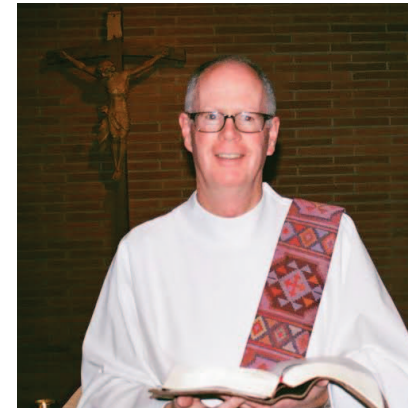
Jesus hears the cry. He gives His blood for the sake of Abel’s blood and then He offers His blood to us, saying to us, in effect: “With my presence in you, with my life in you, with my power in you, I want you to reach out and respond to the cry of others. Through my grace working in you, I want you to offer your life for the sake of your brothers and sisters who are in need.”

The most serious commitment a Christian can make is to participate consciously in the blood of Christ, to come before the altar, to say, “Jesus, I believe that You are here present, that You are offering Your blood, Your very life to me, and I am about to consume Your blood to that Your divine presence will be in me. I am about to unite my life with Yours and, through the grace that comes from that unity, I ask You, Lord, to help me to give my life, to offer up myself as You did, to respond to the cry of my brothers and sisters.” This is what the blood covenant requires. It is not something about which we can be passive. There is a price. There is something asked of us.

In summary, Jesus is present to us in the most intimate, powerful way through the blood covenant. Next, we are present to one another, connected to one another, unified with one another, through our participation with Christ in this blood covenant. Thirdly, by the power of Jesus’ blood, which we receive, which we take into ourselves, we offer our sacrifices, our lives, our trials, for the good of our brothers and sisters. When we do this, our actions take on a supernatural character and power.

I close with this prayer: that each of us may grow in our understanding of the richness, the power, the depth, the majesty of the blood of Jesus and enter into the blood covenant with all of our being. As St. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:11, “For we who live are constantly being given up to death for

the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.”



About the Author

Deacon Tim Sullivan, ordained in the Diocese of Tulsa, Oklahoma in June, 2000, is Chaplain at Jackie Cooper Imports/Nissan in Tulsa. He has served as Executive Director of Catholic Charities of Tulsa and of Catholic Charities of Wayne County (Diocese of Rochester NY) and as Family Life Director and Pro-Life Director of the Diocese of Tulsa. He is the founder of Brother House of Tulsa, an ecumenical ministry for men. Along with Deacon Bill Bawden, Deacon Sullivan is the co-author of *Signposts: How To Be a Catholic Man in the World Today* (The Word Among Us Press, 1999). He has written extensively on marriage, spirituality and evangelization and has been active in the Cursillo Movement since 1990.

Deacon Sullivan holds both a Bachelor's Degree and Juris Doctor degree from the University of Notre Dame. He practiced law in Tulsa, Oklahoma for 18 years before beginning his employment in the Catholic Church. Tim and his wife, Connie, have six children. Since their marriage, they have lived in South Bend, Indiana, Whitefish, Montana, Miami, Florida, Tulsa, Oklahoma and Newark, New York.