



The Holy See

***LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE SUPERIOR GENERAL OF THE CONGREGATION
OF THE MOST HOLY REDEEMER ON THE OCCASION
OF THE CELEBRATION OF THE "GERARDIAN YEAR"***

*To the Very Reverend Father Joseph William Tobin
Superior General of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer*

1. I learned with great pleasure that this Religious Family is preparing to celebrate a special "Gerardian Year" on the propitious coincidence of two anniversaries concerning one of its most illustrious sons, St Gerard Majella: the centenary of his canonization (11 December 1904) and the 250th anniversary of his death (16 October 1755). I join you joyfully, Most Reverend Father, together with your confreres and the devotees of this great disciple of St Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori, in giving praise and thanks to the Lord for the "*great things*" he never ceases to work in the lowly and the poor (cf. Lk 1: 46-50).

Gerard Majella truly was one of the lowly in whom God made the power of his mercy radiant! He entered the Redemptorist Missionary Institute at a young age and with the firm determination to "become holy". His joyful and confident "yes" to God's will, sustained by constant prayer and an outstanding spirit of penance, was manifested through charity attentive to the spiritual and material needs of his neighbour, especially the poorest. Although he had no particular academic qualifications, Gerard penetrated the mystery of the Kingdom of Heaven and spread it in simplicity to all who approached him. He keenly felt the urgent need for the conversion of sinners and worked tirelessly for this cause; likewise, he was able to support and encourage those called to the Religious life.

The fame of his holiness and trust in his intercession continued to grow after his death. Still today, his grave is the destination of numerous pilgrimages from Italy and from many countries on all the continents. Multitudes of the faithful turn to him confidently in the most difficult situations.

2. The "Gerardian Year" is a favourable occasion for the entire Redemptorist Family to renew its personal and community commitment in responding to the contemporary challenges to evangelization with the same promptness and creativity as that of St Gerard and the Founder, St Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori, in their own time.

Dear Redemptorists, as I had the opportunity to recall in the Message I addressed to the members of your most recent General Chapter: "The people that meet you must regard you as "men of God" and, in their contact with you, experience the love of the merciful heavenly Father, who did not hesitate to give his Only-begotten Son (cf. I Jn 4: 9-10) for the salvation of humanity. The interior disposition of Jesus the Good Shepherd must be seen in you, always in search of the lost sheep and ready to rejoice when it is found (cf. Lk 15: 3-7)" (*Address to the Redemptorist Fathers*, 3 October 2003, n. 3; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, [ORE], 15 October 2003, p. 4).

St Gerard is a shining example of this spiritual attitude because of his love for the Crucified One and for the Eucharist, and his devotion to Our Lady. I urge you to follow the course of his spiritual development and stay faithful as he was to your charism, with no fear of the inevitable problems that all true renewal brings. In the above-mentioned Message to the recent General Chapter I wrote in this regard: "The Constitutions of your Institute invite you to recognize current pastoral needs, keeping in mind that your apostolate is characterized, more than by specific types of activity, by a loving service that is offered to those people and groups who are the most spiritually and socially abandoned and poor" (*ibid.*, n. 4).

3. Our world is waiting for an honest witness to the truth, wisdom and power of the Cross (cf. I Cor 1: 17-25). The inculturation of faith and rapid social changes confront the Gospel with many challenges. The clear proclamation of the wisdom of the Cross must therefore be combined with the effective commitment to proclaim the "Gospel of charity", especially to the lowly and the poor, as did Gerard Majella, who thoroughly understood the mystery of the Cross that sheds light on the dramatic nature of sin and at the same time proclaims the liberating and healing power of divine mercy. He prayed: "O God, if I could but convert sinners who are as many as the grains of sand on the seashore and on land, the branches of trees, the leaves of the fields, the atoms of the air, the stars in the sky, the rays of the sun and the moon, all creatures of this earth!" (*Scritti Spirituali*, Materdomini, 2001, 155).

4. For sinners, Gerard spared no efforts, prayers or penance. His love would not let him be indifferent to their choices and their plight; that they might all receive the sacrament of Reconciliation fruitfully was his heart's desire.

A widespread weakening of the sense of sin, hence, of the importance of the sacrament of Reconciliation, permeates contemporary society. This challenges the pastoral work of the Church and in particular the apostolic activity of this religious Congregation, which finds precisely in the proclamation of Christ's Redemption one of its fundamental elements. Persevere, dear

Redemptorists, in imitating your holy Founder, ever sensitive to sinners and ready to welcome them in the sacrament of Reconciliation with the love of a father and the wisdom of a doctor. Continue to nourish the passion of St Gerard, who was utterly consumed by his ardour for the salvation of souls.

5. If he was anxious for sinners to recover their spiritual life through conversion and the sacrament of Penance, St Gerard also paid special attention to newborn life and to expectant mothers, especially those with physical and spiritual problems. This is why today he is still invoked as a special Protector of mothers-to-be. May this typical feature of his charity be for you and for the faithful an encouragement always to love, defend and serve human life.

Threats to life, especially unborn life, continue. This should give rise to reflection particularly on the disturbing spread of a "culture of death", which impels broad sectors of public opinion to justify certain crimes against life in the name of the rights of individual freedom, and on this basis they claim legitimization for it by the State (cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, n. 4).

I hope the "Gerardian Year" will help strengthen Christian efforts to oppose this culture of death and to offer concrete and eloquent gestures at the service of the culture of life. On such an important occasion, I would then like to entrust to you, Most Reverend Father, and to all the Redemptorists, the commitment to act even more decisively to spread the "Gospel of life". You should devote your theological and moral reflection to the service of life, developing it in fidelity to the Alphonsian tradition, starting precisely from situations in which life is unprotected and defenceless. This is the practical way to continue the work of St Gerard Majella and to be witnesses of hope and builders of a new humanity.

With these sentiments and wishes, I implore from the Giver of every good thing, abundant graces and heavenly gifts for you, Most Reverend Father, for the whole Alphonsian Family and for all those who entrust themselves to St Gerard's intercession, as I send a special Blessing with my affection to you all.

From Castel Gandolfo, 6 August 2004

JOHN PAUL II