

**REDEMPTORIST NORTH AMERICAN SECRETARIAT FOR PARTNERSHIP IN MISSION
ONGOING FORMATION AND FAITH-SHARING
BLESSED GENNARO SARNELLI**

Time Frame: 90 minutes

CENTRE OF BEAUTY:

- Mission Cross
- Cloth
- Icon or picture of Gennaro Sarnelli, C.Ss.R.
- Candle
- Bible

HANDOUTS:

- "Blessed Gennaro Sarnelli– A Brief Overview of His Life"
- "Blessed Gennaro Maria Sarnelli" (by Fr. Donnell L. Kirchner, C.Ss.R.)
- Prayer #12, from *In the Spirit of St. Alphonsus* ("Gennaro Sarnelli: Teacher of Prayer, Prophet of Justice"): adapted (Incorporated throughout)

MATERIALS:

- Name Tags (if needed)
- Pens/pencils
- Paper

NOTES:

In preparation for this session, copies of "Blessed Gennaro Sarnelli– A Brief Overview of His Life" and "Blessed Gennaro Maria Sarnelli" (by Fr. Donnell L. Kirchner, C.Ss.R.) are distributed to all participants, in order that they may read the article before coming together.

SATURDAY MORNING OR WEEKDAY EVENING SESSION

GATHERING and WELCOME

Experience– OPENING PRAYER– adapted from Prayer #12, from *In the Spirit of St. Alphonsus* (“Gennaro Sarnelli: Teacher of Prayer, Prophet of Justice”), by Terrence Moran

Gathering Hymn: **We are Called**

1. Come, live in the light!
Shine with the joy and the love of the Lord!
We are called to be light for the Kingdom,
To live in the freedom of the City of God.

CHORUS: We are called to act with justice!
We are called to love tenderly!
We are called to serve one another,
To walk humbly with God!

2. Come, open your heart!
Show your mercy to all those in fear!
We are called to be hope for the hopeless
So all hatred and blindness will be no more! **CHORUS**

3. Sing, sing a new song!
Sing of that great day, when all will be one!
God will reign, and we'll walk with each other
As sisters and brothers united in love. **CHORUS.**

Leader: May the God of Gennaro Sarnelli,
the God who welcomes the outcast, be with you.

All: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray.

All: Jesus, beloved companion, you share our table and our lives. We know that we are sinners. We know as well that, at a deeper level, we have been chosen, redeemed and gathered together in your name. Make our church a place of welcome and our hearts as wide as your mercy. Amen.

Leader: Gennaro Sarnelli was a teacher of prayer. One of his books is entitled, *The World Sanctified by the Practice of Mental Prayer Made in Common*. He shared the Redeemer's own confidence that where two or three are gathered in God's name we are on holy ground. Let us listen to the word of God and to the words of Gennaro Sarnelli and become present to the Redeemer dwelling among us gathered here.

Reader 1: A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew (Matthew 9:10-12)
Pause for reflection

Reader 2: This is a reading from a letter of Sarnelli to St. Alphonsus:
“I have a special favour to ask you. Every time you say Mass, as you break the host and place the small fragment in the chalice, place there my heart too and ask Jesus that he will give me the zeal and strength necessary for my vocation.”
Pause for reflection

Reader 3: Gennaro Sarnelli was a prophet of justice. Here are his own words, taken from one of his conferences:
“How many wealthy life today in Christendom! They spend their time at banquets, at feastings and diversions while the poor of Jesus Christ die of hunger. How many servants and hired hands are defrauded of their just recompense. How the poor struggle to collect what they have earned and would to God that they got it intact! How many rich there are that have a superabundance of everything—except of God. The rich do not wish to give the Lord in the person of the poor even a fraction of the goods of this world— not even to gain eternal life. The strictest judgment is reserved for those who have acted without mercy toward their neighbour.”
Pause for reflection

Reflection: The facilitator encourages sharing in response to the Opening Prayer, in these or similar words:
As we prayed our Opening Prayer, remembering Blessed Gennaro Sarnelli, and as you read the articles in preparation for this session, what spoke to you? Take a few moments to bring your thoughts and reflections together.

Generalization:
Discuss the articles which participants have read in preparation for this gathering: *Blessed Gennaro Sarnelli— A Brief Overview of His Life* and *Blessed Gennaro Maria Sarnelli..* Some reflection questions were appended to the article. You might wish to use the following questions as a discussion guide:

1. What impressed you about Blessed Gennaro Sarnelli as you read and reflected on his life?
2. What can we draw from the spirit and style of Gennaro Sarnelli in ministry that we could apply to our own day and situations?
3. As you read about Gennaro Sarnelli, was anything affirmed for you? If so, what?
4. Did anything you read challenge you? If so, what was it?

Action: Name one thing that you will take home with you from tonight’s session.

CLOSING PRAYER (adapted from Terry Moran's *In the Spirit of St. Alphonsus*)

Leader: Let us bring to prayer the needs of those who were so dear to Sarnelli: the poor, the abused, the victimized.

Leader: For prostitutes...
All: Bring them healing, Spirit of Life.

Leader: For runaway children...
All: Bring them healing, Spirit of Life.

Leader: For those who cannot pray...
All: Bring them healing, Spirit of Life.

Leader: United with Gennaro Sarnelli, we pray as Jesus taught us.

Our Father...

Blessing: The leader takes the candle from the centre of the circle, and it is passed from one person to the next as each says to the person next to him or her these words frequently used by Sarnelli as a blessing, "May Jesus Christ be our light!"

SOCIAL TIME

BLESSED GENNARO MARIA SARNELLI by Donnell L. Kirchner, CSsR

By now, the name Sarnelli should be well known and recognized for the second time in the history of the Congregation. Beatified by John Paul II on May 12, 1996, in St. Peter's Square, hundreds of Redemptorists from around the world and thousands of people from Naples testified to his continuing importance.

This act of acknowledgment and appreciation was a good way to get the preparations for the tricentenary of Alphonsus' birth under way, as Sarnelli could be described as Alphonsus' twin. It was a moment to return to our foundations.

I am not going to try and reproduce a biography on his life. Many others have already done that. Should one like to read a short one, St. Alphonsus wrote the first one (with a very heavy heart) which you can find in the Grimm Editions, volume 17, where one senses how much this dead friend meant to Liguori.

WHAT SARNELLI MEANS

I would like to reflect a bit on what Sarnelli means, what he stood for, what he has to offer to us Redemptorists as we move into a new millennium and a new future.

First of all, there is a school of thought which sees the Papacy using canonization ceremonies as a way of promoting agendas. It is Politics (the English word "Policy" is too pale and weak) in its most noble sense, as Aristotle and Aquinas used the word for the most virtuous and worthy of all human activities in behalf of the common good.

For example, among all holy Redemptorist candidates, John Neumann was made a saint at the time that the Catholic parochial school system was being questioned (and even being shut down in many places). Blessed Peter Donders got the nod when Option for the Poor in the Third World was making headlines. Formation director Stangassinger was push forward in a age of declining vocations and the closing of most minor seminaries.

According to this way of thinking, what message is Sarnelli giving? What is his relevance to us?

Sarnelli's meaning and value to us as a holy man is that he possessed a pastoral creativity to innovate and come up with new answers and solutions when the current ones were not enough. There were no lack of priests, nuns or monks in 1730s in Naples. They were not divided up or spread around very well, not reaching so many members of their society. Fr. Antonio Marrazzo, the General Postulator who has brought the process to its present point, said, at one of the celebrations in Ciorani, that Sarnelli means much more than another intercessor in heaven to be asked for favors. It is to imitate the spirit of his work and to reproduce his examples according to our ways.

HOW MUCH DO WE LOVE GOD?

He wrote, "To figure out how much do we love God, the measure is to weigh how substantial and solid is our love for our neighbor...He who heroically loves his neighbor will heroically love God. He who loves half-heartedly will also love God half-heartedly. If he loves his neighbor in a feeble way, he will love God feebly. And if he does not love his neighbor at all, he will not love God."

Or as Sabatino Majorano said in a signed article in the *L'osservatore Romano*, Sarnelli was rooted in love of God and in his love for others. Creatures are the "apple" of the eye of the Creator. If we do not love them, we are offending God. To look at others only through our own eyes, we will only see what is unworthy and despicable. But through the eyes of faith we see them as they are loved by God. He had a life-long habit of detecting situations which took away a person's dignity.

Like so many other great saints, Gennaro Maria Sarnelli spent hours in prayer, then went out and left monumental contributions.

SARNELLI AND ALPHONSUS

Sarnelli was a trained lawyer like Alphonsus; they first met and formed a deep and enduring friendship for one other while visiting the dying and incurable in a Naples hospital.

While noble or rich families had a private chaplain to take care of their spiritual needs, whole classes of people - in spite of a church on every corner - were without religious and pastoral care.

Two hundred and fifty years before Basic Christian Communities began to have an influence on world-wide church thinking, Alphonsus and Sarnelli were organizing the "Street Chapels", getting people together in their own worlds to bring them the Good News. This work was so effective that there is recorded evidence of its existence functioning up to the end of the last century. If the poorer members of society were not approaching, or felt estranged from, the Church, Alphonsus and Sarnelli took the Church to them.

In late 1732 and 1733, Alphonsus was writing from the hills of Scala for Sarnelli in Naples to come and join the new Institute, in which Sarnelli was very interested because of its goals and ideals. He was so impressed that he not only came, but later on talked his father, a Baron, into donating a piece of family holdings at Ciorani for the maintenance of this group.

If Scala is our Bethlehem, where the Congregation was born, Ciorani is our Nazareth, where the Congregation grew up. One can only speculate what would have happened to the Redemptorists had the Sarnelli family not given us this place to live and stabilize ourselves.

BACK TO THE BIG CITY

After several years of living in community and preaching Missions with the other first Redemptorists (he was passionately devoted to preaching), Sarnelli felt called to return to Naples. Since there were no clear rules of what is meant to be a Redemptorist until 1747-49, but rather a spirit which included preaching the gospel to the most abandoned, Alphonsus had no trouble accepting his good friend's return to a "specialized" apostolate in a big city. He considered Sarnelli a member of the group, because he sent two brothers to be with him on his death bed, and wrote the first account of his life.

For his part, Sarnelli defended Alphonsus and the others from either jealous or misinformed clerics in Naples. Almost single-handedly, he convinced influential people of the seriousness and value of what the Redemptorists were doing in the countryside and on the hills.

THE CITY OF 30,000 PROSTITUTES

His work against controlling prostitution and helping prostitutes was one of the great marks he left on Neapolitan life. It has been claimed that for a city of 500,000 people, Naples had 30,000 prostitutes at that time. That figure doesn't seem so outlandish when one recalls that there were 30,000 Spanish troops garrisoned in the area, a busy sea port, and too many husbands who saw their wives as more for bearing children, mistresses for having sex.

Sarnelli not only talked about the problem, he started a campaign against prostitution as a way of life which did not have to be, yet he worked in favor of those prostitutes who were trapped in it, subsidizing many to get out and do something else.

After he used up all the money he had at his disposal, he tried begging, only to discover that many a so-called friend turned against him and others abused and attacked him. There were madams who had powerful friends and pimps with their connections. He must have stepped on some powerful toes, as his family heard about threats against his life and wanted him to stop.

Francesco Chiovaro claims that Sarnelli was the first person to address the issue of Prostitution, refusing to accept it as the way things were. Many aspects and topics which he treated were eventually written down in Alphonsus' moral theology and went all across Europe.

He got the King to confine these activities to certain sections outside the city's wall, while in the meantime he got many a young gal a husband, a job or a change of life.

What interests us is that there was a pressing social need and problem which he detected. No one was doing anything about it. Sarnelli the saint began something new and got results. I am sure he heard many a confession of prostitutes, but he did not wait for them to come to him.

OR PREACHING, OR PRAYING, OR WRITING

Ten years or more after Sarnelli had died an early death, Alphonsus took up his pen and began to write. Dead at 42 from problems of tuberculosis, having literally worked himself to death, Sarnelli left something like 30 works which went through various editions. They include such topics as mental prayer and praying together in common, the Eucharist and the Blessed Sacrament, Mary, the Cross, Death, the Trinity, moral issues, etc.

In terms of the Trinity, one can see a Trinitarian symbol above the door of the Church at Ciorani. He saw the divine images as wonderful revelations of what God is. Street urchins and prostitutes, visible groups of his pastoral concern, did not know this, nor could they reflect it to others. That was one of the motivating forces which drove him to know and love God.

Alphonsus had the good fortune to live longer and write more, becoming internationally famous. Yet one could easily ask the question, "Who influenced the other most?" They certainly stimulated the best in each other.

When someone asked a Brother one time where was Sarnelli, he said that if he wasn't in chapel praying, he would be in his room writing.

He loved preaching, saying that he would like to preach until the end of the world/time. He possessed good organizational skills, arranging many details of the great Mission for the outlying areas of Naples, started in 1741. It probably hastened his early death from all the effort it cost him. Redemptorists participated in this great Mission, and people in Naples got their first experience of this new preaching group out in the hills.

THE PARISH MISSION

Sarnelli outlined the purpose and objective of the Parish Mission: establish oratories or centers of prayer for the Christian instruction of children and youth; introduce a School of Piety (in the Roman style) for the education of the youth; work on building up the "Devout" life of the faithful, especially teaching them common morning meditation (many of Alphonsus's ascetical works were written so as to be read aloud) and novenas or visits to the Blessed Sacrament in the evenings; and the erecting of dogmatic and moral theology academies for the continuing education of the clergy.

He said that it was necessary to teach all, even the "hicks" and unlettered, how to pray and

make mental prayer, gathering the simple people together every day for meditation in common.

This worked so well that after a first letter to the Italian Bishops, Benedict XIV wrote another letter in 1746 to all the bishops of the world promoting Sarnellian ideas. The oldest written documents of Redemptorist mission preaching reveal the clear mark of Sarnelli's hand.

FOR A GOOD EDUCATION

Working with children and catechetics was another mark of his life. In the early 1700's, people began to realize that the renewal and renovation of society depended upon people getting a good education. It was still a long way to the 20th century ideal of universal education. As a deacon, his first experience with the urban poor proved how necessary it was that something be done. He not only taught street children their prayers, but tried to get them set up for life. After feeding their souls with God's word, more than one kid found himself eating, at Sarnelli's table, food which he himself would prepare (he did not want to inconvenience anyone else). In the content of what was to be preached on the Missions, he got included the teaching of the faith to children.

He was always calling upon ecclesiastical and civil authorities to use their influence and power to do things which promoted the common good. Before people were talking about Human Promotion and promoting the whole person, Sarnelli was perfecting it.

The pastoral problem of blasphemy in his day has little or no value for us today (one still catch traces of it in confessional work in Italy). For the ordinary Neapolitan of that time, though, it was part of his speech, a good way of cussing or making a point. For strict theologians, it was something which deserved a heavy punishment. As a practical result, many people avoided the confessional and stayed away from church as they could not avoid swearing. Sarnelli's love for souls lead him to write and preach about this. It was typical of his concern over any issue which could keep people away from the Sacraments or from God.

I WANT THAT WHICH YOU WANT

As the end of his life became obvious because of the weakened state of his body, he found a great peace after years of spiritual darkness and dryness. His last words were, "Lord, I do not want to either die or to live; I want that which you want."

On another occasion, looking pensive, his reply to what was he thinking about was, "I think of what can be done to help those souls who belong to Jesus Christ. "

Whether the Vatican will see fit to declare Sarnelli a saint or not really means little to us Redemptorists. The Archdiocese of Salerno has already adopted him as their patron "saint." His life is a challenge to us. Today some might call him a take-charge guy. A self-starter. A person with a sense of a mission. He often quoted Isaiah as a way of describing himself, "The Lord has sent me to bring good news to the humble." (61, 1) He had a great amount of zeal. His example continues to confront us to search out and find new solutions to today's current pastoral and social needs, not to leave problems for others to work out.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. What impressed you about Blessed Gennaro Sarnelli as you read and reflected on his life?
2. What can we draw from the spirit and style of Gennaro Sarnelli in ministry that we could apply to our own day and situations?
3. As you read about Gennaro Sarnelli, was anything affirmed for you? If so, what?
4. Did anything you read challenge you? If so, what was it?

