

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

ST. GERARD MAJELLA

Time Frame: 90 minutes

CENTRE OF BEAUTY:

- Mission Cross
- Cloth
- Icon or picture of St. Gerard Majella, C.Ss.R.
- Candle
- Bible

HANDOUTS:

- "The Spirituality of St. Gerard Majella, C.Ss.R." (by Fr. Raymond Corriveau, C.Ss.R.)
- Prayer #20, from *In the Spirit of St. Alphonsus* (St. Gerard Majella): adapted
(Incorporated throughout)

MATERIALS:

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

NOTES:

In preparation for this session, copies of "The Spirituality of St. Gerard Majella, C.Ss.R." (by Fr. Raymond Corriveau, 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 “Fool for Love: Saint Gerard Majella” (#20 in *In the Spirit of St. Alphonsus*, by Terrence Moran, C.Ss.R.)

Leader: May the God whom Gerard Majella called the “Thief of Hearts” be with you.

All: May God’s love possess our hearts forever.

Reader 1: Romans 8:31-39

Response: “We Remember”

We remember how you loved us to your death,
And still we celebrate, for you are with us here;
And we believe that we will see you when you come in your glory, Lord.
We remember, we celebrate, we believe.

Leader: One of Gerard’s contemporaries said of him, “Every word of his was an arrow that went straight to the heart.” Let us listen to the words of our brother Gerard and let his words touch our hearts.

Reader 2: “Life for me is faith. All we do for God is a prayer.”

Reader 3: “The sick and the poor are Jesus Christ visible. The Blessed Sacrament is Jesus Christ invisible.”

Response: We remember how you loved us to your death,
And still we celebrate, for you are with us here;
And we believe that we will see you when you come in your glory, Lord.
We remember, we celebrate, we believe.

Reader 4: “Oh damned self love which blocks the way to an immense treasure, towards paradise on earth, towards God... Unhappy human ignorance which causes us to pass over such a great good.”

Reader 5: “ Oh my God... what can better render us pleasing to you than to do always and in all things your divine Will, than to act always perfectly as you will, where you will it and when you will it, always eager to obey you at the slightest indication. Let us practice then a total indifference in all things which can make us able to do always the Will of God, with that purity of intention which God wants to find in us...”

Response: We remember how you loved us to your death,
And still we celebrate, for you are with us here;
And we believe that we will see you when you come in your glory, Lord.
We remember, we celebrate, we believe.

Reader 6: "Oh the Will of God, what a great and beautiful thing! Hidden treasure, beyond our comprehension. If I understand you well, you are the same as the very God whom I love! It is the duty of every soul to feed only on this beautiful Will of God... in order to be transformed into a perfect union, in one and the same thing in the holy Will of God."

Reader 7: "I will never accuse anyone or speak of the faults of anyone, even in jest. I will always excuse my neighbour, seeing in him the person of Jesus unjustly accused. Should anyone speak ill of another, I will warn him of his fault..."

Response: We remember how you loved us to your death,
And still we celebrate, for you are with us here;
And we believe that we will see you when you come in your glory, Lord.
We remember, we celebrate, we believe.

Reader 8: "I wish to love God, I wish always to be with God, and to do everything for the love of God. ...The center of all love for God consists in giving ourselves entirely to God by being in all things conformable to the divine will, and remaining in this conformity for all eternity."

Response: We remember how you loved us to your death,
And still we celebrate, for you are with us here;
And we believe that we will see you when you come in your glory, Lord.
We remember, we celebrate, we believe.

Reflection: The facilitator encourages sharing in response to the Opening Prayer, in these or similar words:
As we prayed our Opening Prayer, we remembered the words of St. Gerard.
Which of these spoke to you? You are invited to share these with the group.

Generalization:

Discuss the article which participants have read in preparation for this gathering: *The Spirituality of St. Gerard Majella, C.Ss.R.* (by Fr. Raymond Corriveau, C.Ss.R.). 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 St. Gerard as you read and reflected on this article?
2. What can we draw from the spirituality of Gerard that we could

- apply to our own lives or our own day?
3. As you read about Gerard, 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: St. Gerard called himself a "fool for love."

All: May we be willing to risk all for the sake of the Gospel.

Leader: Gerard was a woodcarver who released images of the Crucified Redeemer hidden in pieces of wood.

All: May we grow in faith that the power of the dying and rising of Jesus Christ moves hidden in the history of our world.

Leader: Gerard loved the Feast of Pentecost above all others.

All: May the Spirit give us new energy and renewed enthusiasm.

Leader: Gerard was a tailor who stitched fabrics together to make useful garments.

All: May we repair the torn fabric and the frayed edges of our world and make the earth whole again.

Leader: Gerard was a skilled spiritual director and a preacher of conversion.

All: May we always approach the conscience of another with sensitivity and reverence.

Our Father

Leader: Let us offer a Sign of Peace to one another, greeting each other in the heart of Jesus.

Sign of Peace

SOCIAL TIME

GERARD MAJELLA



Gerard Majella on April 6, 1726, in Muro Lucano, a little town in Southern Italy. He was blessed with a mother, Benedicta Galela and his father was Domenico Majella. He was baptised in the church of the Most Holy Trinity. He made his confirmation on June 5, 1740. His mother showed him the overwhelming love of God, a love that knows no bounds. He was happy because he was close to God.

Gerard was twelve years old when his father died and he became the breadwinner of the family. He was apprenticed to a local tailor and was bullied and beaten by the foreman. After four years apprenticeship, and just when he was about to set up as a tailor on his own, he announced he was going as a servant to work for the local Bishop of Lacedonia, Msgr. Claudio Albini who had confirmed him. He was advised by his friends not to take the job. However, the angry outbursts and endless nagging which prevented other servants from staying more than a few weeks were nothing to Gerard. He was able to turn his hand to anything and worked for the bishop for three years until he died.

As long as Gerard believed he was doing the will of God he would accept anything. Whether he was being bullied at the tailors or taken for granted by the bishop didn't matter; he saw suffering as a part of his following of Christ. "His Lordship wished me well," he would say. And already, Gerard was spending hours with Jesus present in the Blessed Sacrament, the sign of his crucified and risen Lord.

In 1745, aged 19, he returned to Muro where he established himself as a tailor in his own right. His business prospered but he didn't make much money. He gave practically everything away. He would set aside what was needed for his mother and sisters and then give the rest to the poor or as Mass offerings for the souls in purgatory. There was no sudden startling conversion for Gerard. It was just a steady growth in the love of God. Then during Lent of 1747 he resolved to be as completely like Christ as it was possible to be. He undertook the most severe penances and actually sought out humiliation, pretending to be mad and happy to be laughed at in the streets.

He wanted to serve God totally and applied to join the Capuchin friars but was not accepted because of his frail constitution. At the age of twenty-one he tried the life of a hermit. He so wanted to be like Christ that he jumped at the chance to take centre stage for a Passion play, a living tableau in Muro Cathedral on Good Friday. There was a reading of the Gospel narrative illustrated by a sequence of tableaux. Gerard, deemed the best actor among his peers, was chosen to play Jesus. There was a great climax. At the Gospel announcement of Jesus' death, the high double doors of the cathedral were thrown open and there was the crucified Lord dying on the huge cross. So convincing was Gerard's performance as the bloody, naked, Jesus that when his mother saw the soldier thrust his lance, and the body shudder, she fainted.

In 1749 Eastertide the Redemptorists arrived in Muro to give a mission. Gerard was twenty three years old at the time. He followed all the sermons with vivid interest, and felt even more strongly the desire to join the congregation as a coadjutor brother. Getting to know the Redemptorists, he applied to them but was rejected because of the poor state of his health. Meanwhile his mother, Benedicta, had been watching the whole thing; she intuitively realised

the strong determination in her son's heart. And so, on the final day of the mission, she locked him in the house and went to the Church to attend the service bidding farewell to the missionaries. When she got back, she found the window open, the sheets knotted together, and a message: "I am off to become a saint." On his insisting with the Redemptorists, however, he was reluctantly accepted by Father Paolo Cafaro, who thought him too weak to face the hardships of a life of austerity. He sent Gerard to the novitiate in Deliceto, to the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Consolation; Gerard was happy and the date was May 17, 1749. Three years later, on the feast of the Most Holy Redeemer, 16th July 1752, he took his religious vows in Deliceto.

Gerard was an excellent Redemptorist brother and gave excellent service as doorman, tailor, and sacristan. Gerard entered into a period of missionary experiences in the provinces of Foggia and Potenza, much to the profit of everyone who met him. He was also assigned to collect funds for the missions; and his travels were changed into new itinerant missions. It turned out that he was a connoisseur of souls, an advisor to priests, good at persuading people who were alienated from God, and concerned with vocations to the religious life. He gained a reputation for sanctity so that a number of persons came to him for guidance in the spiritual life. He readily responded, revealing a remarkable gift for reading consciences. He became the friend and spiritual guide of the Carmelite nuns of Ripacandida, of the Benedictine nuns of Corato and Atella, and of the Redemptoristine sisters of Foggia and their foundress, the Venerable Maria Celeste Crostarosa. The many miracles attributed to him gained him the title 'Wonder-worker.'

The great achievements of this period were accompanied by a series of harsh trials, exhausting marches with the missionaries, physical collapse, aridity and darkness in his interior life, an infamous calumny that blocked off all contact with the outsiders and even prevented him from receiving the Eucharist.

In August 1755, Gerard returned to Materdomini, the Marian sanctuary he loved so much. His tuberculosis worsened, and two months later, he died in Materdomini on 16th October 1755, worn out by his austerities, and by tuberculosis, on the very day and at the precise hour that he had foretold. His simple and short life (twenty-nine years, six of which were spent in religious life), interwoven with extraordinary deeds, is a clear expression of the love of God and of Gerard's docility to the action of the Holy Spirit. He was beatified by Leo XIII on 29th January 1893 and canonised by Pius X on 11th December 1904. A large number of Catholics throughout the world honour Gerard as the special patron of mothers, sick children and families. Materdomini is now a large shrine and the devotion to St. Gerard is extremely popular in Southern Italy.

The Spirituality of St. Gerard

To reconstruct the Spirituality of any saint is to attempt to enter into the most intimate "secret", both human and spiritual of his or her life. It is therefore not something very easy. One requires above all a sense of deep and sincere respect, with the ability to refrain from any manipulation or forced reading into their lives, even though one could be inspired or moved to do so due to the necessities emerging from the context in which one lives. The historical distance that separates us from him or her obliges us to reconstruct the facts and the

interpretation of these in a manner in which there is a continuity that links the saints Christian experience with our own. Further, it is necessary to restrain one's enthusiasm for one or other aspect that could seem particularly significant and rather place together with patience the diverse aspects so that the basic and fundamental vision can emerge with clarity. Above all, one needs to avoid being a slave to any previously established synthesis or ideas and as far as possible or whenever possible to let the saint speak for himself or herself.

For Gerard Majella the problems regarding interpretation are very evident. The historical documentation about him is not very extensive, even though the early Redemptorist community, urged by St. Alphonsus, did engage themselves in collecting and preserving the more significant witness accounts and documents. Further, St. Gerard was not a specialist or a writer on Spirituality, who was engaged in precisely handing down an innovative or original idea concerning spirituality. The few letters that we have from him are rather occasional in character; the *Rules* that he wrote for himself offers us a very interesting part of his life, it is a disorganised, non-innovative collection of proposals and spiritual memories.

One must also not forget that Gerard was not a person for the headlines or the front page. He spent the 29 years of his short life among the most humble folk, who were absorbed with the worries of everyday life, without any pretensions for the dramatic. He endeavoured to bring good news for the people in search of hope rather than seeking out those whose desire it was to search facts and great personalities to record for posterity. Even for the early Redemptorist community, he remained always a lay brother occupied with thousand worries and concerns about concrete life, although esteemed, loved and very soon presented to young people as a "model of virtue and of observance" to imitate.

These difficulties are underlined from the fact that popular memory/folklore very soon took over where Gerard was concerned. His biography was written with much love, choosing and amplifying the parts that made him appear very close and sensible to the simple people in enduring the challenges of daily life that they were faced with. Popular folklore underscored his quick generosity and solidarity with the most needy, his closeness and familiarity with God and made what was generally beyond the ordinary or common appear "normal", namely, the way of miracles and severe penitential practices.

The reading of Saint Gerard that the liturgy invites us to make from the spirituality of St. Gerard underlines the relationship of assimilation to the crucifix. It invites us to pray in the collect: "O God, who drew to yourself St. Gerard right from his youth and whom you made to conform to the image of your crucified son, grant that we, too, by following his example, may be transformed into this same image." This is a dimension witnessed/attested to from the foundations/basics/roots of the Spirituality of St. Gerard, enriched however by the shades and perspectives that give it a deep air of serenity and of life, that needs to be given its due value especially if done in the past.

The biographies do not seem to give a specific attention to the critical reconstruction of the spirituality of St. Gerard. It is not that this concern is not present in them, but it does not receive a specific treatment that would have been right to expect. This is true beginning with *The Life of the Servant of God Brother Gerard Majella of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer*, by Tannoia, that does not have a specific chapter dedicated to spirituality.

Keeping in mind what has been said above we endeavour to present an idea of the spirituality of St. Gerard.¹ This is not a comparative study on the different interpretations that have been in existence on the Spirituality of St. Gerard. It is neither a specifically historical study, rather it is an invitation to listen to Gerard, convinced that only in this manner it is possible to penetrate into his "secret" and to bring together that word which the Spirit, through the person and figure of Gerard, continues to address us even today, even if our ecclesial and social context is very different from that of Gerard.

The spirituality of the Young Redemptorist Brother

In mid May 1749, Gerard entered the Redemptorist house, sent here from Rionero by Father Cafaro and his missionary companions. It was simply a test. It had not seemed opportune to accept him immediately, without requesting the authorization of Alphonsus, even though Cafaro had directly accepted him. Gerard, who saw the things of God, gave himself to the congregation not on a trial basis, but totally. "He was received by 'ours' in the house of Santa Maria della Consolazione (Deliceto). We all know how he lived: humble, patient, mortified, recollected, dedicated to prayer, exemplary in everything."

God had brought him to the congregation of St. Alphonsus, which had won the approval of Pope Benedict XIV only three months before, in order to take on the missionary charism in favour of people who were spiritually and objectively abandoned, in order to change himself into a living 'memory', a 'living, animate portrait' of Jesus Crucified, and thus to be, although not a priest, a great Redemptorist missionary. As a layman he had been transformed by the Holy Spirit into a living memory of the crucified Jesus by the path of compassion with Jesus on the cross. On the Good Friday when he took up the cross and appeared before the people in the cathedral of Muro, it can be said that God showed him so as to point out how Gerard, until that day, had identified with his suffering Son. Later on, not only in Muro and in its cathedral, but also in the Church as a whole, starting with the Redemptorist Congregation, his compassion would come to be co-redemption. With total dedication he would surrender himself to be transformed into Christ according to the special charism of the Redemptorists.

The spiritual charism of the Redemptorists, as Alphonsus lived it, beginning from his first apostolic experience among the poor of Naples, and as the later inspired his Redemptorist Congregation, was centred in Christ, sent by the Father as a missionary to save human beings, especially sinners and the poor. Redemptorists were to imitate him by means of the transformation into Christ the missionary of the Father, taking up the living Gospel as the norm of spiritual life. Action and contemplation, asceticism and mysticism, were thus brought back to the norm that animated the apostles: receiving in prayer the Spirit of Christ and becoming a Church by announcing Christ, the Saviour of the world. This was apostolic spirituality.

When we say that Gerard made his own the spiritual model of the Redemptorist brother, we wish to stress this special charism. Work, too, would be in his case a testimony of prayer and an apostolate. Until this time Gerard had as his spiritual director the Holy Spirit, that

¹ Cfr. S. Majarano, "La spiritualità gerardina", in *Spicilegium Historicum*, 52(1994) Fasc. 1., 89-103, English Transl., in *Saint Gerard Majella: His Writings and Spirituality*, (Missouri, Liguori 2002), ch. 7, 261-277; Domenico Capone, *L'immagine spirituale di S. Gerardo* (Materdomini, 1990), "The Christocentricism of St. Gerard", in *Saint Gerard Majella*, (Missouri, Liguori 2002), 179-259; Hamish Swanston, "Gerard Majella: The Joyful Saint", in *Saint Gerard Majella*, (Missouri, Liguori 2002), 1-39.

is, the love of Christ. Upon becoming a religious, he had to choose a spiritual director. "He choose as his spiritual director Father Paolo Cafaro and he continued with him until the father died, obeying him in everything with absolute perfection."

In October 1749, Cafaro became aware of Gerard's spiritual greatness, and thought that it had to be protected and amplified by means of total separation from the world in the solitude of Deliceto. He treated him with a 'harsh hand' and opposed 'any contact with the public and any leaving of the house.' In this solitude Gerard would acquire the forms and the language of normative asceticism. For this reason he would write in his resolutions: "Before all else I shall have to cling, in my mind and in my heart, to the resolution that I made during the exercises in Deliceto, that is, to be minutely observant of every part of the rule, to persevere and grow in perfection, to strive to acquire in silence, patience, and, especially, union with God. To do the contrary would be to receive my punishment, according as the Lord spoke to my heart; it would mean being outside the congregation, and, as a result, condemned."

The new language is noticeable. Earlier, his norm had been Christ as a person in the Eucharist and on the crucifix, who transforms him into his likeness. Now he speaks of conquering perfection and achieving silence, patience, and the detailed fulfilment of the rule. This is the language that was and is used in ascetical conferences and in spiritual direction. The inspiration of the Lord passes into ascetical direction, which avails itself of the fear of remaining outside the congregation and being condemned. The language is correct, but it accents the model of spirituality that is ascetically motivated toward a virtuous perfection, which has to be achieved. Gerard, who was already living immersed in the immensity of God and was drawing upon the 'plenitude' of Christ, made this model his own with great docility, but he gave it a nuance that proceeded totally from the Holy Spirit.

With this tension, he gave himself to heavy work, which was normal back then for Redemptorist lay brothers. Brother Nicola testified: "He was especially fond of physical labour, so that he never wasted time. When he didn't have something to do, he tried to help others in their occupations; and when the others didn't need him he set himself to pulling down some old wall and prepared the material to rebuild it, and all this with supreme energy."

And similarly: "When the bread was being baked for the community, he worked as much as four men; he took the initiative and told the other brothers: 'Let me do it, you rest' and he worked alone. Nevertheless, in the midst of manual tasks he was always recollected and united with God; he was always seen with his eyes lifted to heaven, as if he were in ecstasy." His hands kneaded the dough for the bread, and his mind dove into the mystical union with God. Action became contemplation. The ascetical sacrifice turned into mystical elevation.

His macerations of the flesh continue. Father Cafaro had an advantage on him there, because for him flagellation had the power to repress temptations. Gerard followed him with his whole spirit; not, however, to repress temptations, but to become one with Christ crucified. The mortifications he inflicted on himself in eating and sleeping also were harsh. "His bed," Caione tell us, "was made of boards and a sort of mattress with a little straw in the ends, but in the middle, the part he slept on, it was full of stones, and the pillow was a larger stone." Needless to say, it wasn't always that way, because Caione himself tells us that his bed was at the disposition of the community. "When some guest arrived in the house and there was no place to put him, Gerard's bed was always available for the others; and he went to sleep in the

church behind the main altar. He placed himself there for the great love that he had for Jesus in the sacrament.”

For meals he adjusted to the community’s standards; but, as he says in his Rules, he fasted Saturdays on bread and water, and the rest of the week he ate somewhat less than the others. What he did eat he made so bitter that it was painful to the taste. His lungs had already begun to bleed, but he continued doing the work of four men.

One might get the impression that Gerard lived a sad and painful life filled with mortifications and penances. Yet, that is far from the truth. Gerard, a schoolmaster reported, had been ‘always cheerful’ in class, as an apprentice he had chosen a wrong moment to laugh at the foreman of the tailor’s shop, later as the domestic servant of the irascible bishop, he had managed to ‘keep a good smile on him.’ He maintained this reputation for merriment through his years in the Congregation: questioned about a rumour that had been taking a dip in the sea, ‘Gerard replied with a laugh...’; hearing the music of a village flute-player, ‘he began to leap and dance’; sitting with the archbishop’s secretary, ‘he laughed at his jokes...’; on someone’s beginning to play an air from a modern opera on the recreation room harpsichord, Gerard seized an astonished Father ‘and danced round the room with him.’ He was even caught grinning towards the Lord in the Tabernacle as he passed through the chapel.

Gerard wanted others to be jollier. “*Stay cheerful,*” he commands Maria di Gesù when she is not re-elected prioress at Ripacandida. Letting Maria Celeste dello Spirito Santo know that he has at last located a copy of the songbook she had been asking all year, he tells her ‘*sing in your cell,*’ that way, he declares, she will become a great saint. His immediate response to Caione’s anxious enquiry about his health is to say, “*You really must cheer up, my dear Father.*” He set about cheering up laymen too. Bartolomeo Melchione had been a bright spark about town when a bachelor, but after a year of marriage, “he had become dull and heavy.” Gerard cooked him a meal and then spent the evening singing songs with him. Melchione kept up a chorus all the way home to his wife. His friends thought it a miracle. And it must be supposed that his wife forgave Gerard for keeping Melchione out so late. A nice smile turns away anger.

There were, inevitably, occasions when the easygoingness made life more difficult for another Brother. Tannoia tell a story of Francesco Tartaglione, who had to cook the community supper, sending Gerard to the Naples fish market, and of Gerard’s meeting a poor man on the way and handing over all the housekeeping money in exchange for his tray of tinder boxes. Being questioned by the waiting Brother on his return, “Where is our fish?” the cheerful Gerard settled down to tell Francesco how he’d met the man with the tray, how the poor man was hungry, and how he had bought all his stock, and how he was sure, “they’ll come in handy some day.” “This answer,” Tannoia records dryly, “annoyed Brother Francesco not a little.”

Gerard had many stories from his boyhood. At Caposele, when the community was sitting around the fire in the recreation room, Gerard told them how he would often stay all night in the unlit church, and how one dawn as he came out of the side door he had been met by a terrible ferocious dog ready to tear him to bloody pieces. A demon straight out of hell it was, for sure. Gerard had a great repertory of these deliciously frightening tales. He told them well – with of course the delight of a true anecdotalist. So the community, of course, shivered and encouraged him to frighten them again. There had been another time, he told them, when a great carving had been hurled down at him as he prayed, a huge wooden figure. He’s barely

escaped with his life. Tannoia, trying hard to maintain his character as a reliable historian remarks: "I do not know whether this should be viewed as an accident or not." Gerard, says Caione again and again, "was always cheerful."

Always United to his "beloved" God

Whoever tries to delve into the readings of Gerard, is immediately struck by the depth and spontaneity of his communion with God. He never appears withdrawn into himself, even in the most difficult and incomprehensible moments of his life. He lived always in and intense and loving communion with his "beloved Redeemer", with his "beloved God", as he used so often to say.

To Sister Maria of Jesus he would repeat with insistence: "*Let us love our God, who alone merits to be loved: and who can we be able to live if from our hearts we do not love our beloved God?*". He would confide: "*I find myself now in Naples in the company of Fr. Margotta and now more than ever I will be left with my beloved God.*". Such was the story of his entire life, left with his beloved God, an unreserved surrender to his beloved God.

They used to say, according to the report at the process for the beatification of Gerard, referring to the confreres who lived with Gerard, "They said that there never was a moment where his mind was not raised to God, in whose contemplation he would emerge like a most profound theologian... speaking rather loftily on the mysteries of our faith and of the Most Holy Trinity and of the Incarnation of the Word... One would see him continually filled with the force of divine love that he would break out in the most dense acclamations of faith, which were beyond the comprehension of the onlookers."

This loving communion with God did not leave Gerard distracted or cut off from the exigencies of daily life and above all from the thousands of needy people. It was the fruit of a vision of faith that saw in the events, even those most difficult, the salvific presence of the Redeemer. An expression, rather significant, which he was used to, and one reported by Caione, was: "*If God might raise from our eyes this visor, in every place we would see paradise. Beneath these stones, beneath these rocks, too, God is present.*"

The intensity of this communion was such that at times just one glance at an image was enough to set him off into ecstasy. For example the time, while preparing the refectory in the community for dinner: "He glanced at a painting of the *Ecce homo*" reports Caione, "and there was such ardour in his glance that he remained on his knees, freed/removed from his senses, looking at the painting." The same event took place on another day before an image of the Madonna in the house of the Capuchins: "He was seen raised in the air... shouting, while many respected people were present: "Admire how beautiful she is" and he kept on kissing with great and extraordinary fervour the image."

He was never tired in exhorting the readers of his letters to his vision of faith that drew him to a faithful communion. For instance he used to write to Sr. Maria of Jesus in the first months of 1753: "*Who lacks in faith, lacks God. I have already resolved with all my being to live and die, united/bound to holy faith. Faith for me is life and for me life is faith. Oh God! And who wants to live without holy faith? And I would always like to exclaim: Hurray to our holy faith of our beloved God. God alone merits love. And how can I live if I am missing my God?*"

The most acute suffering for Gerard is when this vision of communion seemed to be veiled/hidden. He would confide in the same nun in the first months of 1754: *“Thus goes the day these days: There are ups and downs! I have descended to such a manner that I believe there wont be any recourse for me anymore. And I believe that my punishments will last till eternity. But I do not care if they might last forever: it is enough that I might love God and that I might give him my total preference. This is my punishment: that I believe that I suffer without God!”*

Gerard the Theologian

Tannoia said of Gerard, “The faithful servant was not like a light hidden under a bushel, but God placed him on a candlestick that men might see his works, and that souls might thus be led to glorify their heavenly Father.” Tannoia well discerned that Gerard could not be kept within the bounds of what the Fathers thought appropriate. Gerard, he knew, was almost, at times, indistinguishable from a Reverend Brother. There was that little pile of books in the tailor’s shop, for instance. Scholarly books. Cafaro was accustomed to give little elementary talks to the Brothers on the mysteries of Christian faith. He found that Gerard was following up what he had been hearing with real excitement. “When Gerard was in our house, during that rest hour which the Rule allots to each subject, he ordinarily used the time not for sleeping but for reading.” He became as lively a theologian as any of the students, in fact more than most of them and more than most of the parochial clergy around. They acknowledged this willingly all over the area. This was true whenever Gerard went with the missionaries. At Naples, learned gentlemen came to hear him expound the doctrine of the Church, most especially the doctrine of the most holy Trinity. The canons of Corato got him to speak to them of ‘the mysteries of God.’ Bishop Muoio of Muro, when Gerard went back to his hometown, was much impressed by ‘the precision of his disquisitions on theological topics.’ So were bishops Basta of Melfi and Amato of Lacedonia. Don Giuseppe de Lucia remembered how, on his entering a conversation with Gerard, he expounded the doctrine of the Incarnation as perfectly as Saint Augustine or Saint Thomas could have done. Some, of course, were not so pleased that a lay Brother should be received as a theologian. Not that it did them much good to complain. Celestino de Robertis thought it great fun to spread the story of the Naples priest who entered into controversy with their uneducated Brother about the Most Holy Trinity. The opinionated cleric had to make a hasty retreat. De Robertis was proudly astonished to hear his Brother deal with each *quaestio*. “He expressed himself with ease and clarity on matters which the best theologians treat with caution. Paolo Cafaro’s comment is significant: “Wherever Gerard goes everything is turned topsy-turvy.”

Gerard had been meditating intelligently on what he had learned in his unsystematic reading, especially what he had gathered of Augustinian and Thomist comment on the fourth gospel. He had been placing what he had further understood through these meditations with that Trinitarian tradition of a Christian’s relation to Christ which is most vitally expressed in the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), and his personal friend, Maria Crocifissa dei Tomasi (1645-1699).

Alphonsus, in his meditations, had so identified with Jesus, the heir, that it became difficult for him to contemplate the Crucifixion as anything but a manifestation of the inexorable

outward demand of the Father's justice. Gerard, unencumbered by any anxieties concerned with fatherhood and authority, was free to appreciate the cross as a presentation of loving, of loving with the Trinity, a love that overflows. The Father's love sustains the Son in his awful expression of their love for us.

He could hear, too, with the Evangelist, that at the climactic instant love at the cross, Jesus handed over the divine Spirit to the Christian. "The grace of the Holy Spirit," he could write to Gaetano Santorelli during the terrible Eastertide of 1754, is "always within the Spirit." Sharing the same Spirit, the Christian will be alive with Jesus to do the will of the Father.

Gerard's language, as he makes his grand effort to articulate his sense of the divine will within his living, becomes so intense that only one of the transcribers of his Rule of Life was prepared to copy out his climactic apostrophe: "*To do what God wills is it necessary only that I should will, yes I, I, I, should will only God, and it is by God's will that I will God, that I will only what God wills.*" That "I, I, I" proclaims that nothing of himself is lost, nothing of his will, in willing only what God wills. Those repeated affirmations are of a self who is finding himself, and finding himself free to will, as he wills what God wills.

What God wills is total loving. "*The Holy Spirit will enable you,*" Gerard told a lay companion, "*to know how much more you should suffer for the love of him who suffered so much for our love.*" Love is sustaining. Total love is totally sustaining. So it is that when, under the loving will of the Father, that compassionate suffering with his Son seems too great to bear, "the grace and consolation of the Holy Spirit," will keep us loving. At this apprehension of "our Holy Spirit" Gerard no longer felt like a madman in his loving. No longer did he feel that he could not endure life in the house a moment longer. He could make sense of himself. He could endure. For, through "our Holy Spirit," he could see how it was that Jesus should endure each loving demand of the Father. Gerard could see the Father upholding his crucified son in his arms under the loving hover of the Holy Spirit. He could appreciate the Cross as the showing forth of the love of the Triune Godhead: "*Whenever I see the Cross, I am determined to make this little devotions of always saying a Gloria Patri*". As it is with the Crucified, it is with Gerard. He is experiencing that love. He had come through reading, meditating, waiting, into an appreciation of Christian's enjoying together the inner life of the Trinity.

The wonder of Gerard is not that he learned so much. No, the wonder was rather his being so splendid a teacher. There is a marvellous incident of how Gerard helped a priest from his hometown of Muro, Don Donato Antonio Spicci, to understand the first words of the Gospel of John. The local house physician, Doctor Nicola Santorelli said of Gerard, "His words rendered the most abstruse doctrines intelligible and those which seemed the most obscure became clear and plain as he talked."

It was a puzzle to most of the educated priests and laymen how deep theological things could be understood by 'a poor lay brother'. It is a puzzle now that none of them seem to have noticed how natively intelligent Gerard was. It is said that a theologian is one who understands the mysteries of the faith and articulates it for the community. Gerard did this not just for the community of Redemptorists but also in fact for the community of his time, his people and above all the poor. While his name went feature in the list of all time great theologians of the Church he was in fact a theologian deeply rooted in the mystery of God, a God whom he loved dearly and whose love he wanted all to experience.

Love for One's Neighbour

For a true believer it is not possible to separate the love of God from that of his brothers and sisters: it is a unique, inseparable love, rooted in the gift of the Spirit. If we have a clear picture of the intensity of Gerard's communion with his "beloved" God, we can only marvel at the depth and spontaneity of his rapport with his "neighbours". The text of the letter to Sr. Maria in the first months of 1753, which has been cited above, is significant in this regard. The faith, of which Gerard was speaking of, does not just indicate his rapport with God, but also the special fraternal and brotherly rapport that united him to the nun. After an initial salutation: *"May our beloved and loving Jesus be always with you, my dear mother, and may our most holy Mother Mary keep you always in the most precious love of our beloved God"*, he would add a hint of jovial irony: *"Behold the answer to your most reverend self. And I tell you that one needs to write to the whole universe to make it known. And that one tell how one of the most famous marvels of God, after so long a time, your most reverend self has actually remembered me, your servant... I infinitely enjoy this and praise the highest creator. Enough now, let it be as one wishes, I entrust everything to my beloved God and I forgive you. If then your most reverend self is grumbling, I tell you that it is not done dear Sr. Maria, to promise much and not to deliver. But of whatever I promise, I am not capable of forgetting myself... This is how I am, for when I see myself distanced from your reverence, I to a great extent hasten myself to walk back to you, in order that I can find my beloved God."*

Previously, the 6th April 1752, he had written to her: *"O God, and what maximum contentment do I have within me today, having received your most estimated self, something I longed for. But, because I speak to you truthfully before God, this desire is not according to my wish but from the most high, that I must always ask the help of others, because I cannot... As such I console myself that your most reverend self and all your daughters are most busy on your feet praying before the divine majesty for me. And I certainly hope and want on my part from him that he may most abundantly pay you back for this."*

It was a communion based on the dimension of prayer. Gerard never tired of asking for it for him and for others and promised it to those to whom he would write. On the 4th October 1754 he reminded Sr. Michela, superior of Ripacandida: *"I do not ask for anything other than that ever so often you might give an obedience to all my beloved sisters that they might remember me always in their holy prayers, just as I unworthily always do for them."* The context was always that of salvation that would bring eternity: *"Pray to God always for me – he wrote a few days later to another sister of Ripacandida – and tell him to make me a saint, for heavens sake I am losing time. Oh my God, what bad luck I have that I pass so much of the day and time in a futile manner, that is without knowing myself how to gain from it. O how much I lose."*

But this did not mean that Gerard forgot the thousand problems that the many needy faced daily. The letters written to set up the dowry necessary for the needy/poor girls to enter a convent are indeed very beautiful. He did not feel embarrassed to ask the help of whomsoever could give a hand. But he would quite strongly remind Sr. Michela: *"As regards the difficulty that exists for the sister of Sr. Maria Giuseppa, you tell me that I might content myself with the will of God. Yes, lord, take this away from me and then you might see that it remains in me, yes! And for the money that is in my power, which I got from friends, you tell me that you want*

it all, and that if it were not enough to make her a nun, then it would serve to marry her. What are you saying, Oh Mother? This neither I nor anyone can do, because it would be the same as cheating our congregation, because from those whom I got the money from, I sought it from them in order to make her a nun and not to get her married. And if she is not successful in being a nun, then the money must be returned to those who gave it."

The attention of Gerard towards others brought him to care also for the most simple of needs of the simplest of people. One is struck by what he wrote to Sr. Maria Celeste of the Holy Spirit on the 28th August 1754: "*Dear Sister, I have remembered since last year your reverend self wanted a booklet of little songs; but why did you never bring it to my attention, I have not sent it to you: I awaited the moment. Now that I find myself in Naples, I have remembered. Here it is now, I send it to you. Sing from your cell, so that you may be a great saint and do pray always to God for me.*"

This charity would give rise to miracles when he went out to meet the poor. The popular folklore has above all underlined this aspect especially during the harsh winter of 1755. Caione also witnesses to this: "due to the extreme scarcity because of the severe winter, over 120 poor people would turn up at our doors every morning. And here one cannot express sufficiently the great charity with which Gerard would care for and assist them in their misery. He would do everything for everyone, he would console some with his musical words about heaven, instruct others on things of the faith, give them little pious talks and then finally give them something to satisfy their needs and send them off doubly consoled."

The Option for the Poor

There cannot be a true and authentic living of the Christian life without a love for the poor. The ways in which we demonstrate our love for the poor may be varied but as the Synod of Bishops on the theme of the vocation and mission of the laity (1987) stated, "The Holy Spirit enables us to discover clearly that holiness today is not possible without a commitment to justice and without a solidarity with the poor and the oppressed."

The immediate and generous solidarity that Gerard demonstrated with the needy poor is a basic aspect of his spirituality. The basis for this solidarity lies in the fact that he was born into a poor family and from a very early age he knew personally the many daily hardships that a poor family has to endure. However, this solidarity with the poor is based more on his love for his Redeemer who chose specifically to identify with the abandoned poor.

We have already stated above the generosity and love that Gerard demonstrated to the poor during the harsh winter of 1755. Caione testifies to this in his writings. He has a remarkable story about the shortage of bread and Gerard's intercessory powers. "There was once present a certain person of some notable ranking but not having enough due to the famine. He was feeling embarrassed to come forward to ask for bread. One of the little boys known to the community informed Gerard about the situation. Gerard replied 'Oh my son, why have you come so late? I have already given away everything!' But then reflecting a bit, he turned and went into the house, and seemed to draw out of his chest a loaf of bread so fresh baked and hot that it just came out of the oven... In that harsh winter of famine in Caposele no one seemed to go away hungry who came to knock at door of the community, thanks to the efforts of Gerard."

This love for the poor was something Gerard had even as a young adolescent. There is the story told by Caione about the new coat that his uncle had given him and which he gave to a poor man. Seeing his young nephew so weak and frail Gerard's uncle gave him a new coat to keep him warm. But hardly had Gerard left the house that he met an old man so cold that he immediately gave him the coat. When his uncle came to hear of this he vented his anger on Gerard for giving away so new and expensive a coat. Gerard's reply was, "*I gave it to another person more needy than me.*"

True charity results in gestures and words that always arise in response to the needs of others. It is being faithful to the example of Christ who came to encounter human beings: he incarnated himself in the concrete situation of the needs of his fellow human beings so as to provide a response that would be an effective help and assistance to them. Charity therefore always is a result of sincerity and respect. Gerard always made sure to avoid any show or the dramatic in his charity thus being faithful to the words of Christ, "Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them...But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." (Mt:1, 3). Gerard knew well that the poor were the poor of Christ and that when we respond with sincerity to their needs, we are the first to be enriched by them. This respectful and generous love for the poor is described by Caione as being "a natural inclination towards the poor", underlining "that he was very compassionate with all and specially with the poor, for whom he had a special softness."

Gerard reached out not just to the poor but also to the poor who were sick and infirm as well carrying for them medicines from the community infirmary. He was especially very attentive and caring towards the disconsolate widows and aged spinsters who could very easily be deceived due to their simplicity and honesty. Caione recounts the many visits to the poor who were sick in Naples: "It was always Brother Gerard who often was found in the corridors of the Hospital of the Incurables, one with those poor sick ones, talking to them about God and inviting them to accept and carry the cross that the Lord have sent them as well as to offer God all the pains and sufferings that they had to bear. He always filled them with hope and left them all consoled. On seeing him the suffering poor sick in the hospital would rejoice and say, 'Our Father, you console us. We want you to remain always with us. Do not ever leave us, stay with us always!'

Frank and serene freedom

Gerard lived all that we have said so far with a spirit of freedom and of frankness that fascinated and surprised all those who came into contact with him. He radiated a sense of total availability to the Spirit, the fruit of that vision of faith with which he saw and valued every event. The comment of the Rector of Materdomini made after the episode regarding the wine cask left open without the wine flowing out, is significant: "God joked/played with him in an unusual manner. One needs to act in this manner according to the Spirit that inspires him: otherwise we cannot explain such a stupendous wonder/portent."

One is introduced to his understanding of freedom through the expression "*I vow to do the most perfect, that is whatever according to me is the most perfect before God.*" Gerard in fact was careful to add some "*reservations...in order to avoid any confusion or scruple, which would prevent me from working.*"

The horizon had to always remain open and wide. At the end of the *Rule* he wrote with much affection: "*Oh my God, and if I could cause to convert to you the many sinners, as many as the grains of the seashore and of the soil, the leaves of the trees, the leaves of the fields, the atoms of the air, stars of the sky, rays of the sun and the moon, all creatures of the earth.*"

This kind of freedom is well linked with obedience, ready and generous, about which the witnesses at the process of beatification often made reference to. Don Tomasso Cozzarelli of Caposele affirmed for instance: "The observance of the servant of God could be very often powerfully seen for he had the belief that the voice of the superior... was the same voice and command of God, and he esteemed disobedience as sinful and absolutely rude. Thus was born in him that exercise of heroic obedience, a sign, a voice, a simple word of the superior was more than enough to make him follow the most difficult thing. Sometimes joining to the unusual and stupendous his obedience, the great simplicity united to the wish of being scorned for Jesus Christ."

Such a lively meaning of the value of obedience did not prevent him from writing: "*I will warn everyone, even if it be the Rector Major, when he speaks badly about one's neighbour.*"

Experiencing the "motive" of God totally as his own "motive", Gerard was also certain that through his obedience his own "motive" might be the "motive" of God. Such interior freedom and faithful serenity are clearly evidenced in the incident concerning the famous calumny. Claudio Ripoli a Redemptorist states, "He came to be called to this college of Pagani by the holy founder, and when he came to be bitterly castigated he did not use a single word in his defence; and with constant tranquillity, neither opened his mouth for the smallest lament. But with others in private he said only in the confidence of total assurance: *If our rule forbids me to justify myself, my cause/motive is God's cause/motive.*"

The famous incident of the calumny: There was a magistrate Candido Caggiano who had three daughters and a son. The boy being already a subdeacon and two of his sisters, Saveria and Veronica, being nuns, it seemed to the youngest Nerea, a girl of twenty years, that she should enter a convent, too. This provided a financial problem for her parents. Three dowries in so short a time would threaten even a comfortably off family. So Gerard, as he had so often done for girls in such circumstances, collected the necessary two hundred ducats from his richer patrons. But three weeks after she had been received at Foggia, it was apparent to Mother Celeste Crostarosa that Nerea did not have a vocation for their convent and she was sent home. No girl at that time could easily face her townsfolk as a failed nun. And three weeks was quite long enough to give her such a reputation. Nerea was full of resentment against Gerard who was so clearly responsible for getting her into this mess. She felt outraged. She flung accusations about.

It is not entirely clear what Nerea alleged. It may be that she told the parish priest, that Gerard had molested her. It was certainly he (Don Benigno Bonaventura) who forwarded the accusation to Alphonsus. But it is likelier that she told her family with sensible self-preserving care against paternal fury, that Gerard had been playing around with another girl. There's a version of this nasty little tale, which suggests that Nerea accused him of sinning with the fourteen year old Nicoletta Capucci, one of those girls whom Gerard had been laughing with in the upper room while her mother prepared supper. Perhaps Nerea had wanted to be sharing that seductive laughter. Perhaps she even believed there might be something to her accusation. There was another report that Nerea had allowed herself to be seduced by her

confessor, and that, on her becoming pregnant, this priest had been the first to suggest that they put the blame on Gerard. Nerea was making an accusation to which every missionary, wandering from village to village, house-to-house, sleeping in strange beds, eating at strange tables, felt himself exposed.

Now, it seemed to everyone who had been greeted by Gerard's easy smile when they passed in those draughty corridors of Deliceto that the charge had some credulity. Gerard was a really attractive young man. They had been recognizing this when they were sending him out to charm money from the local gentry and their ladies. "Women wanted to give him their earrings and men would have him take their waistcoat button." But he was, it had to be admitted, very high spirited. Too high spirited for his own good, perhaps. Dancing in the recreation room, indeed.

When Villani arrived at Deliceto, sent by Alphonsus to investigate, no one in the community was prepared to say that such a thing, as Nerea alleged was downright impossible. Gerard, was therefore, sent, already in disgrace, judged quite capable of getting into such a scrape, to be sentenced by Alphonsus at Pagani. Not having the evidence to warrant dismissing Gerard but feeling that he must fulfil the expectations of all who were watching them, inside and outside the Congregation, Alphonsus acted in quick defence of the Congregation and its reputation. He could not think of Gerard's reputation at the time. Later, he might have come to think that it was only by the justification of an innocent member of the Congregation that there could be any effective justification of the Congregation. But for now, Alphonsus forbade Gerard's receiving Holy Communion. He was not to have any communication with anyone outside the Congregation. He was to take himself off to Ciorani.

Gerard, secure in his innocence, secure in the just God's working his purpose out, knew that in this silent *imitation* of the unjustly accused Christ he was behaving just as a man of honour would. He would not defend himself against vulgar abuse. It was saddeningly evident to Gerard that Alphonsus had put himself into a most awkward position. Gerard's consciousness of his own innocence allowed him to think only of the peace of mind of his superior. He felt he should be comforting the Rector Major at this dark time. Alphonsus did not know what to do with his Brother who said nothing of himself but who, meeting him in the corridor declared, as if determined to sustain Alphonsus' sense of his own integrity against the shock that must come, "Father, you have the face of an angel." And Gerard's smiling ways were having their effect again. Others in the Ciorani community were becoming very restless about their part in this affair. They wanted it over. One of the suggested that at least Gerard could serve his Mass. "Don't tempt me," said Gerard, "I should snatch the host out of your hands." Caione remembered an incident on the stairway. One of the Fathers suggested going to the rector major and asking that the ban on Communion be lifted. Gerard hesitated a moment before saying, "No, No." Then giving himself a hard blow with his hand to the balustrade to steady himself. "We must continue under the pressure of the will of my dear God."

Meanwhile, not having obtained a confession from the Brother, or any evidence of his guilt or innocence, Alphonsus was getting frustrated. Don Saverio Rossi, the rector of Ciorani, was not required to make more regular reports on Gerard's behaviour. Tannoia himself remembered being sent by Alphonsus to be an unofficial spy, "watch him as narrowly as possible." But it was not by such snooping that the truth was discovered. It is; in fact, not at all

clear how the truth was discovered. It may be that the seductive priest himself wrote a letter to Alphonsus. Caione says that the man was now on his deathbed, and that his confessor required that he disclose his part in the affair. Or maybe it was Nerea who wrote. Perhaps she could not bear the weight of her own conscience. Or maybe it was her confessor who imposed this recantation. Or again, she may have at last told her family the truth. Her appalled parents, the magistrate and his wife, may have written to Alphonsus, or it might have been their son, the subdeacon who may have written to Alphonsus. There was, Tannoia knew, more than one letter to the correspondence.

Alphonsus felt now, as any good superior, any good man, would feel, very uncomfortable with himself and his government of his subjects. By this time, he had listened to Margotta's account of Gerard's goodness and to the satisfactory reports of Rossi and Tannoia that they had nothing to report. There was no more doubt about this Brother's obedience than about his chastity. Alphonsus had to clear things up. This time, he felt it better not to order Gerard to travel to him. Roles were, to his mind, already somewhat reversed. He came across from Pagani to Ciorani. But that was condescension enough. He would see the Brother across a desk. And Gerard, seeing his difficulties, was anxious to help him. He was certainly not going to explain how well Alphonsus had played Pilate in their scene together. But he was hoping to make his sense of a good Redemptorist Brother absolutely clear to the rector major. So, to Alphonsus' urgent question, "Why did you not defend yourself?" Gerard answered, as only Alphonsus could have told Tannoia, "*How could I, since the Rule commands us not to make excuses, but to bear every mortification in silence.*"

This scene has been a favourite with Redemptorists illustrators. Paintings of Gerard pointing to an open copy of the Rule on Alphonsus' desk are on every house wall. There is a very special significance here. As plainly, Chapter I of Part II of the 1749 Pontifical Rule, organising the relations of Fathers in a house, declares "they shall not excuse themselves or defend themselves" when rebuked by a rector. Silence under accusation, like gardening and waiting at table, is being presented as an extraordinary perfecting discipline in the spiritual lives of Fathers. Neither this Rule, which lies open in those paintings, nor any of the earlier texts of the Rule make reference to the conduct of Brothers.

A Father and a Brother praying together, working together, and suffering together in Rome had obtained the Pontifical Rule. Villani must have gracefully recognized that when he brought Francesco Tartaglione with him to take leave of Pope Benedict. As the first to know themselves to be members of the new Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, Father and Brother had gone on a grateful pilgrimage to Loreto together. But the Fathers had not, as they read, translated the Rule into the language of shared vocation. Nor, of course, had the Brothers. There is a shock for all of them in that pictured scene of Alphonsus and Gerard with the Rule open between them. They had taken Brothers' endurance of blames for granted, as they had taken their garden and refectory and latrine services. Brothers were naturally treated as those at the base of every hieratic organisation were treated – as rightless domestic servants were treated. Gerard is asserting the startling new notion that the Rule applies to Brothers as to Fathers. He has exercised his right to perfecting silence precisely as a Redemptorist living within the Rule, like a Father.

Alphonsus was, of course, intelligent enough to catch Gerard's meaning. At the development Gerard was proposing for his self-understanding within the Congregation. There

was in this claim much to unsettle Alphonsus. Much that he would instinctively resist, at least when the same claim to live under the Rule like Fathers was made by other Brothers.

The Rector Major may have found Gerard, after their second interview, an awkward reminder of a moment when the Congregation had proved to be less than transparent figure of the communion of saints. So Francesco Margotta had quite easily persuaded Alphonsus that Gerard should go back with him to Naples for a while. Be out of the rector major's sight for a bit. It was during this next stay in the city that Gerard's sense of their all being Redemptorists together in one mission community, Brothers with Fathers becoming saints within the protective Rule, working with the citizens for the realization of the Kingdom of God, achieved its largest expression.

Among the Redemptorists who gave him spiritual guidance as a religious, Father Francesco Giovenale was active for some time. And we owe to Giovenale part of the reports about Gerard that Caione collected. He tells us: "Gerard had received a special grace from God: to be free from temptations regarding purity, in fact he did not know what these meant. For example he let his eyes roam freely. Noting this, I called him and asked him: Why do you go around immodestly with eyes raised rather than lowered? He would reply: Why do I have to keep them that way? Knowing his simplicity, and not to place him in evil intention, I said to him: That is what I want! From then on he did not at all raise again his eyes, not for fear of temptation, because he did not have them, but because of obedience."

Obviously the issue here is looking at women's faces when speaking with them, something that back then was considered to lack modesty. Asceticism had identified a 'free glance' with 'immodest eyes'. We believe it would be hard to find anyone today who thinks this way. It is one thing to observe with desire something that is inappropriate, and another thing altogether to look at others as part of communication, with eyes that animate the conversation and show appreciation for the other person. Until he was twenty-three, Gerard had in all simplicity conversed with men and women. His freedom was of the sort that God has given by creating us as persons in dialogue, something quite different from libertinism, which does not dialogue, but deceives and seduces. Gerard came from a family of simple people, who saw things as God made them. By contrast, those who have had the bad experience of a culture that makes women as object of seduction and in so doing offends them, may need some restrictive asceticism here.

Another sign of Gerard's courtesy in treating men and women is the episode from July 1750 when he was accompanying a novice from Deliceto to Ciorani. At a pensione, the daughter to the landlord felt attracted to him and, thinking he would make an ideal husband for her, proposed marriage. Gerard did not become indignant, as if she were trying to provoke him. Father Caione says that this happened because of 'the arrangements of the devil'. But Gerard, who knew the devil very well, did not react against either Satan or the woman, but 'with admirable gentleness', hid his feelings and told her that he was already married to the Virgin Mary.

Let us also recall the familiarity with which he treated the daughters of the Cappucci family in Lacedonia. Gerard was not naïve. He knew how many people act, abusing natural values. But he acted with the freedom of the children of God and saw things 'according to the heart of God,' that is, as God created them. For twenty-three years he behaved this way among the good people of Muro and so he grew in humanity and holiness.

Gerard's freedom is not superficiality much less a naivety. In the letters more than once he guards against a negative interpretation: *"Do not be surprised if I write to you, Sr. Maria of Jesus, so affectionately, there is just one reason for doing so, because I highly esteem you as the true and most delightful spouse of Jesus Christ. And for this reason I am moved to converse with you continuously. But the only reason, that touches the depth of my heart, is that all of you brides remind me of and are representations of the Divine Mother."* To Sr. Michela, he adds another reason: *"because we are brothers and sisters in my Lord, therefore justly we must always purely love each other in God."*

But most significant are the sentences, filled with much pain as they were written during his last illness to the young woman Isabella Salvadore: *"God knows how I am. Yet, my Lord allows that I write to you with this fist, so that from this you can argue how much God love you... My dear daughter, you cannot imagine how much I love you in God and how much I wish your eternal health, because God wishes that I might have a special glance at you. But you know, blessed child, that my affection is purified however from every worldly ardour. It is an affection made divine in God. I reiterate then that I love you in God, not outside of God; and if my affection should gradually leave the confines of God, I will be scoundrel fit for hell. And as I love you, I love all the creatures that love God; and should I know any person that loves me outside the confines of God, on behalf of my Lord I will curse them, because our affection must be purified in love, everything in God and not outside of God."*

This same deep freedom allowed Gerard to remain faithful to the signs of popular piety, without however being bound by them: with love for the holy images – which he not only defended and protected with care, but learnt also how to model on paper – to the prayers that he promised for others and asked for himself, to the numerous penitential practices. However, it was all based on that depth of communion and meeting with God that transformed the particular image into the recalling of a presence that he absorbed to the point of ecstasy.

The Eucharist

Gerard had a very deep love for the Eucharist. Right from his youth, notes Caione, "above all it was his modesty that was admirable, with which he used to go through the town and deal with people, his external disposition and reverence, with which he used to stay for hours in the church, before the Blessed Sacrament, that he would so often visit. He had a great desire that others too would visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and animated by his fervour and zealous example many would visit the Blessed Sacrament and then great and inexplicable was his joy."

This love for the Eucharist increased once he entered the congregation. Popular folklore has it that so often he would be so deeply absorbed before the tabernacle, without realizing the passing of time. One morning his prayer of thanksgiving after communion went on till midday. When the confreres called out to him reminding him about his work in the community, he simply replied: *"Oh! You have such little faith: What are the angels doing? And so saying he went with some of the confreres into the kitchen; and with astonishment they saw that everything was already ready for lunch."*

Before the tabernacle, the intensity of his dialogue with his beloved Redeemer was difficult to control. "When during the day he would assist at the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, says Antonio de Cosimo, despite his efforts to hide himself from the eyes of others, Gerard's face would become radiant in the face; one could notice his chest panting and agitated; his mind totally concentrated and as if transcending the senses, to see him that way was like seeing the seraphim in an act of adoration."

But the Eucharist never became an alibi or an excuse to feign from the duties to which he was assigned. With the kind of spontaneity for which he was known, Gerard could remind even Christ in the Blessed Sacrament that he was bound by his obedience. Gaetano Trerotola recalls an incident: "Bro. Gerard was absolutely obedient to the demand of his superior who had prohibited him from spending too much time before the tabernacle. Once passing by the chapel I heard Gerard say, *Let me go for I have to do so!* The superior hearing this wanted to know the reason for the statement and Gerard very modestly told him so, even the superior was taken aback and admired the holiness of the servant of God and his deep familiarity with Jesus in the blessed sacrament."

From the Eucharist Gerard learnt above all the depth and the generosity of self-giving: the "insanity" of love, to use his own words. Once, while he was in prayer before the Eucharist "he was seen laughing; and he was obliged by the superior to give the reason why, he naively said that he had heard a voice from the tabernacle saying to him: *You mad fellow, you mad fellow! The day will come when I will ease you of this your madness!* To this voice Gerard simply replied: *Lord, is it not that I learn this madness from you? Tell me, why is it that you being the great and infinite God are constrained to shut yourself in this narrow compartment for love of me?"*

He was "crazy" in concretising his availability in giving himself to his brothers and sisters. Caione observes that, "He specially liked to be tired, in a way that he would never lose any time. When he did not have anything to do, he would seek to help others with their duties... When it was time to bake bread for the community he would do the work of four. He would constantly tell his confreres, *Let me do it, go and rest yourselves!* He was always recollected and united to God, very often with eyes raised to heaven, more or less in a state of having transcended the senses."

A Missionary Spirituality

Gerard without being a priest was indeed a great missionary. We can trace his travels through Apulia, Lucania, Irpinia, and the Campagna. As a great missionary, he converted individuals and whole towns and led many of them to the sacrament of penance. Gerard's first biographer, Gaspare Caione, following a narrative method, describes for us the spirituality of the saint upon his return to Muro Lucano, on his trip to Corato, to Castelgrande, Ripacandida, Foggia, Caposele, Naples, Calitri, Oliveto, Auletta, Vietri di Potenza, and so on. What was the energy that made him so powerful? He was not a captivating orator nor did he give great sermons. Was it the power of his miracles? That may have drawn the crowds, and it filled them with wonder. But the truth, what he called 'his truth', was something different; it was totally interior: the truth of God who attracted him to Jesus crucified, a truth that he made his own responsibly, suffering unspeakably and coming to be a 'living memory' of Christ the evangelist with the light and power of the Holy Spirit.

A person is a real missionary if he lets himself be inhabited by the missionary sent by God the Father to convert the world – Jesus Christ – and lets himself be transformed by the Holy Spirit, the only one who can animate the words and action of the missionary. It is true that the Word of God and the faith of the simple, sincere people can produce tumultuous results with rather mediocre and, at times even barely worthy missionaries. But it is also certain that if Christ finds a missionary who lets himself be transformed into him, the missionary action comes to be great and produces not ten but one hundred percent.

Gerard's spirituality cannot be analysed or described according to schemas of a progressive and well-directed path toward perfection, but it can be narrated. By always doing what seemed to him the most perfect and mortifying thing possible, Gerard made his own path and followed it constantly to the God who was drawing him closer through different situations. We know that Father Cafaro, Gerard's companion on his personal interior path and his religious superior, did not want Gerard to leave the house, except when it was strictly necessary for the community. For example, in July 1750, he sent him to accompany the novice Sebastiano Ricciardi from Deliceto to the novitiate house in distant Ciorani. But in October 1751, Father Cafaro was sent from Deliceto to Materdomini as rector. With his departure, a new period in Gerard's life would begin.

This new period, which went until his death in October 1755, would find him busy with domestic chores, but also with first, he was subject to the provisional superior, who was Father Francesco Giovenale. In February 1752, the new permanent Superior arrived, Father Carmel Fiocchi, the consultor general, only thirty-three years old at that time. Following the suggestion of Fathers Fiocchi and Mazzini, Alphonsus allowed Gerard to make his novitiate in six months, as immediate preparation for taking his vows as a religious. He did so in July 16, 1752, three years after having arrived 'on a trial basis' in Deliceto. Three years later Gerard would be admitted into paradise by God, as a 'most useful' saint for the whole Church.

In December 1751, after the departure of Father Cafaro, Gerard was sent on a trip; and thus began his apostolate outside the house. God opened for him the doors of a place with an intense mystical life, the monastery of the Carmelite nuns at Ripacandida. Alphonsus, who had preached a retreat there the year before, in 1750, acknowledged that 'I would never have thought I would find a carnation like this on a rock.' Gerard would come to be a spiritual brother and counsellor to the superior of this convent, Mother Maria of Jesus, as he would to all the other nuns.

His first letter to Mother Maria gives us notice of the quality of his new apostolate: "*Oh you, my divine Love, make yourself always present in the heart of this your chosen and beloved spouse.*" It is the first of the letters that have been preserved. From it, we can deduce that Gerard had been in Ripacandida for more than one day. The letter ends in this way: "*I remain embracing you within the sacred side of Jesus Christ.*"

Thanks to a letter from Gerard to Father Mazzini, dated July 26, 1752, we know that both of them were in touch with Mother Celeste Crostarosa, the foundress of the monastery of Foggia. Speaking of Gerard's apostolate in Mother Celeste's monastery, Caione writes: "Another place that Gerard liked very much, apart from Ripacandida, was the monastery of the Most Holy Saviour in the city of Foggia; since it belonged to our institute and the rule was observed exactly there and the nuns lived in the most exemplary manner, Gerard, so to speak, kept his heart there constantly; and with the superior's permission, he visited them frequently,

encouraging them with his fervent discourses so to acquire the most solid virtues and regular observance. Still more, with the permission of his superiors, he spent a good part of Holy Week in continual prayers and recollection in the friendly church of this monastery, with infinite consolation for his spirit, as he himself wrote to a nun from the monastery of Ripacandida.”

Besides the Redemptoristine nuns at Foggia and the Carmelites at Ripacandida, there were the Poor Clares of Muro Lucano. In September 1752, when they asked the bishop, Msgr. Vito Moio, for permission for Gerard to come to talk to them, he answered: “A conversation with Brother Gerard is worth more than an entire Lent with the fathers of his Congregation.”

But his missionary activity was perhaps aimed more at sinners than at persons who were God’s friends. This, Caione says, stirred up against him the violent hatred of demons: “This hatred of the demons against the brother probably originated no so much because of the virtuous and holy life that he led as because of the effort and inexplicable fervour that he had for the salvation of souls and the conversion of sinners, to which he dedicated all his prayers and mortifications. The Lord comforted him marvellously in this with the consolation of seeing the conversion of sinners who had grown old through years in the mire of guilt. God gave such efficacy to his words that for a sinner talking with Gerard was the same as converting. Many people in various occupations asked the local superior to send Brother Gerard to them in order to help some soul in need; and the Lord blessed his journeys in a special way. Still more, when he was sent outside the house for other matters, he almost never returned without a prey snatched from the claws of hell.”

He not only converted individual persons, but whole towns. On April 24, 1753, Signore Saverio Scozzo writes as follows to the superior of the Deliceto house: “Divine providence has caused Brother Gerard to come unexpectedly, miraculously, to Corato so as to win the salvation of his beloved creatures, since with his coming and with his good example he has drawn the entire town to devotion and has brought about stupendous conversions.”

In this regard it is well worth listening to Gerard in resolution no. 31 of his Rules: “*During the time of silence, I will strive to consider the passion and the death of Jesus and the sufferings of Mary Most Holy.*” And he adds: “*My continual prayers, communions, and so on, are always on behalf of poor sinners, offering them to God in the precious blood of Christ.*” His religious life came to be a continuous “Mass”: offering himself entirely to Jesus, who gives his blood to renew humanity and thus offer it to the Father. But sinners are not the only ones who need help; those who are going along the path of holiness and have to constantly resist weakness, by which they find themselves tempted to stop. “*When they tell me that a person lives according to the will of God and that in one moment he believes he can no longer bear up and seeks help, I will pray to God for him...so that thus I may obtain from the Lord the holy conformity with his divine will.*” Gerard unites himself to the person who is in trouble, offering him or her his prayers, sacrifices, and so on, so that in the communion of charity he or she may rise up to God and implore the grace to be able to go on.

A Fervent Devotee of Mary

When one goes through the writings of Gerard one is naturally struck by the numerous references to Mary. One can say that there is not a single page in his writings where the name of the Blessed Virgin Mary is not cited in one form or another. He always began his letters with the words ‘Jesus and Mary.’ This same aspect was testified to by the witnesses at the process

for his beatification, "He always had the sweet names of Jesus and Mary on his lips." On his deathbed this ardour remained as he searched for the pictures of Jesus Crucified and Mary. Caione notes, "His eyes did not move from the Crucifix and the beautiful painting of the Blessed Mother at the foot of the cross which was on the wall facing his bed. He would keep looking at it and let out deep sighs of love and ardour."

Gerard's love for Mary was warm, sincere and rich in spontaneity. His love and adoration for Mary was very much part of the popular Marian piety that he picked up and learnt from his own mother. In his *Rules for Life* we find the following, "*Six Holy Marys with my forehead against the ground in the morning and in the night.*" And again, "*In all the moments of silence I will devote myself to reflecting on the passion and death of Jesus Christ, and about the sorrows of Mary.*"

His love for Mary was so deep that it was enough for him to just pass an image or painting of Mary to send him into raptures and very often into ecstasy. This has been attested to by Saverio Bizzari who was present in the home of Francesco Capucci, "one day in his house Gerard was raised in the air before the painting of the Blessed Virgin shouting, this in the presence of a number of well know laymen, 'See how beautiful she is, how beautiful she is', as he kissed and kissed with great and extraordinary ardour her image on the painting." There is a popular story from his childhood that the young Gerard one day stood before the picture of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Cathedral of Muro with a ring in his fingers in order to marry her.

All through his life, in spite of the many problems and difficulties, Gerard demonstrated a tremendous freedom and security. The secret for this lay in his profound belief in the providence of his beloved God and in the maternal intercession of Mary. In his *Rules of Life* he chose the Holy Spirit "*as my only consoler and protector in all things. Let him be my advocate and conqueror in all my causes.*" In the very next line he displays his deep devotion of Mary as he adds, "*And you, my only joy, Immaculate Virgin Mary, (I hope that) you will be my second protectress and consolatrix in all that must happen to me. And with regard to these resolutions of mine, may you ever be my only advocate before God.*" This faith in the protection of Mary from all harm was attested to many times in the process for his beatification. Brother Antonio di Cosimo states that many of the confreres would hear him so often rebuking the demons that would seem to attack him or disturb him during his prayer or during his walks along the corridor. Gerard would rebuke them saying, "*You can do nothing to me, no harm to me as long as I have Jesus and my Mamma Maria with me.*" There are similar stories narrated how Mary came to his protection against the power of the evil one that seemed to attack him at times.

Mary was not just a protector from evil for Gerard. He also saw her as a guarantor of his evangelical life especially with regard to his union and love with his fellow human beings. He writes to Father Giovanni Mazzini, "*My dear Father, How much I love you in Jesus Christ and in Mary Most Holy. I hope that it is a pure affection in God. I do not know how to explain this. Only God knows how.*" He could also remind Sister Maria Gesù, "*I write to you in haste, my dear and blessed mother, with the goal of putting myself once again at your feet, and at the feet of all those dear sisters of mine: I wish they may always be in the wide open side of Jesus Christ, and in the afflicted heart of Mary Most Holy, where all sweetness and repose are to be found.*"

From Mary Gerard always prayed for grace to be faithful. This we have seen already in his desire expressed in his *Rules of Life*. We see the same in some of his letters to his friends. Writing to Giovanni Mazzini in 1752 he begins, "*The grace of the Holy Spirit fill and always be in the soul of your Reverence and may the Immaculate Mother keep it for you. Amen.*" The same expression is seen also at the start of his letter to Sister Maria Gesù, "*Our dear and loving Jesus be always with you, my dear mother, and Mother Mary Most Holy, keep you always in the lovingness of our dear God. Amen.*" Writing to Father Giovenale and presenting his *Rules of Life* he starts, "*May God's grace always be in our heart and may Mary Most Holy keep it there. Amen.*"

Gerard was very firmly convinced about the importance of fidelity and the necessity that it be guided and protected by divine assistance and the maternal protection of Mary. He thus has the following advice to Sister Maria Celeste dello Spirito Santo regarding the problems she was having with her vocation: "*If the storm has not passed, I have much faith and much hope in the Most Holy Trinity and in Mother Mary (Mamma Maria) that your charity has to become a saint where you are. Don't make me look like a liar. Crush the head of the great infernal beast that seeks to throw you out of this holy place. Despise him: tell him that you are a spouse of Jesus Christ, so that he trembles. Be joyful, love God with your heart, always give yourself generously to him and make the demon burst and die.*" Similarly he writes to another nun, "*Live with caution; at every moment you must trust in Mary Most Holy, so that she can assist you and overthrow your every enemy with her power.*" At the root of these sentiments is the firm belief that Mary the mother of mercies knows all our difficulties and will be there to assist us as she assisted the young couple at the wedding feast of Cana in Galilee (Jn 2:1-11).

In his Marian devotion and piety Gerard is totally in tune with Alphonsus who never tires of speaking of the mercy of the Blessed virgin Mary and her role as intercessor and protector of one's vocation.

The Will of God

The uniformity with the will of God was Gerard's constant yearning, right until his deathbed. He admitted this to Caione who was his superior, "*I figure that this bed might be the will of God for me and I am nailed to this bed as if I am nailed to the will of God. In fact, I figure that I and the will of God have become the same thing.*" Caione adds: "This what gave him a great sensitivity (before God). On the door of his room he had sign posted on which, with capital letters were written the following words: Here is one who does the will of God, as God wills and for how long as God pleases." In this Gerard was in total harmony with the view of St. Alphonsus: "All our perfection consists in loving our most sweet God... But then all our perfection of the love of God consists in uniting our will to his holy will... If then we want with pleasure to gratify totally the heart of God, let us then procure in full to conform ourselves to his divine will; and not just to conform ourselves, but to uniform ourselves as much as God requires. Conformity means that we unite/bond our will to the will of God; but uniformity means more, that we make it totally one will, from the divine will and from our will, yes for we do not want anything other than what God wants, and may the will of God be ours."²

All the biographies agree in pointing out that the will of God was the fulcrum / hub and nucleus of the spirituality of Gerard. But not all underline adequately that his was a happy,

² *Uniformità alla volontà di Dio*, in *Opere ascetiche*, vol. I., Rome 1933, 283 and 286.

joyful, convinced and faithful carrying out of the will of God; it was a Yes that grew. His YES was one that was always special in its magnitude. He entrusted himself to his "beloved God", because he knew well that God's will for humanity and for every person is a project of life, of fullness and of happiness.

One cannot but marvel at his words to Sr. Maria of Jesus, asking her to pray that another sister be cured from a very grave illness: *"I do not want her dead. You pray to my beloved God, because I want that she make herself more holy and to die very old so that she might rejoice in spending many years in the service of god. Courage, deal with divine power. And this time may God let things happen as we wish. In the name of God, I give you an obedience not to let her die."* For Gerard this too meant coming to be one single thing with the will of God.

On the 24th April 1752 he wrote to the same sister a very memorable letter: *"I cannot understand how a spiritual person, consecrated to her God, can encounter any bitterness on this earth, by not accepting always and in everything the beautiful will of God, which is the sole substance of our souls. And what better thing can be found to give him pleasure except always and in everything to do his divine will? And what else does he want from us but that his divine will always be done perfectly, as he wishes, where he wishes, and when he wishes, and that we be always ready for the slightest sign from him? So then let us remain, completely indifferent in everything, so that we may always and in all things do the divine will, with that supreme purity of intention that God wants from us. The greatest thing is the will of God! Oh hidden and priceless treasure! Ah, if I understand you rightly, you are worth as much as my dear God himself, and who can understand you, if not my dear God? You sister, pursue therefore to always be transformed in a perfect union, with the same beautiful will of God! And just as the angels do in heaven we want to do here on earth. The will of God in heaven, the will of God on earth; therefore, paradise in heaven, paradise on earth."*

In the presence of the final cross in his life too, the yes to the will of God would have his entire faithfulness and generosity. Gerard knew well that only thus would he be able to continue further the salvific mystery of the paschal cross of Christ. It will suffice to read the words he wrote at the end of the summer of 1754 to Sr. Mary of Jesus: *"I write to you from below the cross and, because I do not have time to live, I am constrained to write in haste. Sympathize with me in my agony. I have little spirit now. And if I had not forced myself, I would not have written this letter because of tears. My sufferings are very painful and sour and they bring on the spasms of death. And when I believe that I will die, at that point I rediscover life so that I am more in affliction and pain. I do not know what else to say to you; I am not able to give you my bile and poison to sadden/embitter you. I know that you are happy. But now that you are happy, it is enough to encourage me and invigorate me in God. May he be blessed always, who gives me so many graces, that, in exchange of making me die under his holy strokes, he gives me more of the victory of life, filled with torments so that I might be an imitator of my divine Redeemer. He is my master, I his disciple. Rightly so that I must learn from him to follow his divine footsteps."*

This aspect of the Spirituality of St. Gerard, namely joy in suffering, has been well brought out in the liturgy for his feast. The witnesses at the process of his beatification noted that, "Gerard was always seen joyful, even during the most painful illness; and he was only seen in pain and torment while reflecting on the passion and death of Jesus Christ the

Redeemer." In order to greatly participate in the cross of Christ he would double "the punishment of his customary penances, like fasting, the cilices, the hair shirts, flagellations/the disciple to the point of blood, and all with tenderness and affection."

The witnesses were in agreement in underlying that all this could be verified every time he set out to fight against sin. "He was always joyful and affectionate with the humblest person, and he was observed to be sad only when he saw sinners and their sins, and these he would admonish gently and would thus call them back to God." He used to intensify his penitential practices as part of his generous yes to the cross.

There are, no doubt, various keys to reading the penitential content of Gerard's spirituality, beginning with the popular roots of his homeland. The final and ultimate reason for all his penitential practices and his joyful and decisive yes to the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ would have to be from the words of St. Paul which he made his own: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church." (Col 1:24)

United with the Crucified Lord in Death

On August 23, 1755, after a long journey begging alms in Senerchia, Oliveto, Auletta, Vietri di Potenza, San Gregorio, and Buccino, through valleys and over mountains, beneath the torrid sun of July and August, with his lungs ruined, Gerard returned to Olivetto. Other doctors had sent him to Dr. Giuseppe Salvatore, after suffering pulmonary haemorrhages caused by tuberculosis in San Gregorio and Buccino. Arcangelo Salvatore, a priest and the doctor's brother, welcomed him. On the next morning, he wrote the following letter to the superior of Materdomini, Father Caione: *"Your Reverence should know that while I was kneeling in the church of San Gregorio, I had a haemorrhage, I went secretly to a doctor and I told him what had happened. He assured me that it wasn't from the chest but from the throat. He saw that I didn't have a fever; for this reason he repeated many times and with many different expressions that it wasn't anything. He bled the vein of my head; during this I did not feel discomfort. Yesterday afternoon, when I arrived in Buccino, as I was going to bed my usual cough returned, and I spat up blood as I had the other times. They brought two doctors, who gave me some remedies and bled me in the foot. The blood that I threw up, I also threw up without pain in the chest and without any trouble. They told me that it didn't come from the chest, and they ordered me immediately to go the next morning, which is today, to Oliveto, where the air is better and also to consult with the family physician Signore Giuseppe Salvatore. I have not yet met him, but the Lord archpriest, his brother, tells me that he will come this afternoon. I inform Your Reverence of this, in order to know what I should do. If you wish me to leave immediately, I will go. If you wish me to continue collecting alms, I will continue without any problems, because now I feel better in my chest than when I was in the house. I have not had any more cough. Courage, send me a strong order, whatever it may be. I greatly regret causing Your Reverence worries. Joyfully, my dear father, it is nothing. Commend me to God, that he may make me always do his holy will, and I remain at...Oliveto, August 23, 1755."*

Deathly sick, Gerard went like a lamb from doctor to doctor, always serene and always disposed to go out on the road again, walking from town to town. His delicacy of feeling is

striking, since he realizes that Father Caione will be worried, and so he encourages him: "It's nothing," he tells him. An on top of everything, the supreme issue: perfect conformity to the will of God. This is Gerard's moral stature.

Gerard was asked to return to Materdomini if it was fine with the doctor. Caione narrates, "His return to the house was on the last day of August. He returned pale and emaciated, but at the same time with a serene and amiable air. Upon seeing him, Father Caione had to make a great effort to hold back the tears that came to his eyes in abundance. (Caione always speaks about himself in the third person). It was noon. Upon noticing that Gerard had a fever, he told him to go to bed at once. He obeyed joyfully and without losing his customary and unalterable tranquillity. The pulmonary haemorrhages continued and increased day by day, causing him to lose a great deal of blood. All of this naturally made everyone fear for his health. He went on with an enviable serenity, a peace befitting paradise, and a heroic conformity to God's will. When the superior asked him, at the point of his most intense sufferings, if he was keeping up his conformity with God's will, he answered: 'Yes, Father. I imagine that his bed is the will of God, and I am nailed to it as if I were nailed to the will of God. Still more, I imagine that I and the will of God are only one thing.' This made a great impression. He has placed in his room, on the wall in front of the bed, a large crucifix of plaster and paper, with a shattered and bloody Jesus, to encourage him to suffer more joyfully the pains and troubles of his illness. During the day, he rose up from the bed as best as he could, settled himself on a sort of couch that they placed for him beneath the crucifix, and stayed there for one or two hours, beside himself, with the look of a person in agony, joining his sufferings with those of his redeemer." Caione continues, "Above the door of the room he had put a sign in which could be read in capital letters: *Here God's will is being done, as God wishes and for as long as he wishes.*

Some days before September 8, Caione reports, "As he was getting worse from day to day, it was decided to give him holy viaticum. The local superior designated Father Francesco Buonamano to bring it to him. When he came to his room, Brother Gerard was sitting up in bed, in an attitude so humble and reverent that it caused emotion and sadness to everyone who saw him. Father took the sacred host, showed it to Gerard, and said: 'here is the lord who will soon be your judge. Revive your faith and do some good deed.' Then Gerard, with a great feeling of both confidence and humility, answered: '*Lord, you know that whatever I have done and said, I have done it all for your honour and glory. I die happy because I believe I have not sought in every thing any other thing but your glory and will.*' Having said that, he took communion and was alone with Jesus for a while, to vent his heart's affection."

A few days later, his spiritual director Father Francesco Margotta, sent him an order from Naples to get up and recover. He did get up and seemed to be reborn, "leaning on a simple staff," Caione says, "he walked around, not just in the house but through the garden as well." But this apparent improvement did not last long. Before mid September he fell back in his bed, never to rise again.

When Gerard was close to giving up his spirit to the Lord, no longer being able to make acts with the accustomed intensity and vehemence, he said time after time in a low voice: "*My God, I repent. I wish to die to give you pleasure. I wish to die to your most holy will.*"

Caione recounts the last moments of Gerard's life: "Around half an hour before he died, Gerard turned to Brother Saverio, who was assisting him, and let him know that he wanted a

little water. The brother went to get it, and as he was gone too long, because he could not find the keys to the refectory, upon returning he found Gerard turned toward the wall. At first glance, he appeared to be sleeping. But after a few minutes he saw the patient turn around and heave a sigh, which made him realize that Gerard was expiring. He ran immediately to call another brother and Father Buonanno, who was the minister and superior of the house at the time (Caione was temporarily in Pagani). But when the Father came into the room he found him at death's door, and shortly afterwards he peacefully surrendered his soul to the Lord, at dawn on October 16, 1755."

The actor who played Jesus in the passion play had now not just acted had become united to his crucified Lord, dying on his bed of pain, which was his cross of suffering, crying out like his Lord, "I thirst", and dying alone, like his crucified Lord, even if it was for a few moments when the brother ran off to get water and call the community. In life as in death he was united, one with his Lord and Master, Jesus the Crucified One.

After telling Gerard's story, Caione ends with this prayer and it could be our prayer too, "My dear brother, pray to God, whom you loved with such great ardour. Pray for me, unhappy sinner. Make my heart burn in the love of Christ our Lord, so that I can be your companion."

Conclusion

It has been our effort in this reflection to try to listen to Gerard. From his letters it can be concluded that here is a spirituality that invites one to open one's heart and broaden one's horizons, without however forgetting that all this involves the cross as an essential but sure way.

In conclusion we turn to Gerard and listen to him, in a letter written on the 22nd January 1752 to Sr. Maria of Jesus. These words could be words of our Beloved confrere and brother that are addressed to us today as we endeavour to live in a committed manner our Redemptorist vocation, giving our lives for plentiful Redemption:

"Courage, be joyful! Be cheerful therefore, and do not be afraid! Remain strong and with courage in the face of the battle, in order to win more a more glorious triumph in our kingdom in heaven. We should not be afraid therefore of what the evil spirit sows in our hearts, because that is his work. But it is our work not to let him triumph... It is true that sometimes we see ourselves confused and weak. There is no confusion with God; there is no weakness with the divine power! Because it is certain that in the battle the Divine Majesty will help us with his divine arm. Therefore we can remain cheerful and increase ever so deeply in the divine will. And we bless his most holy works for all eternity."

REFLECT AND DISCUSS:

1. What impressed you about St. Gerard as you read and reflected on this article?
2. What can we draw from the spirituality of Gerard that we could apply to our own lives or our own day?
3. As you read about Gerard, was anything affirmed for you? If so, what?
4. Did anything you read challenge you? If so, what was it?