



May 31, 2017  
Feast of the Visitation of Mary  
Prot. No. 0000 072/2017

***"And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"***  
(Luke 1:43)

Dear Confreres, Sisters, Lay Missionaries and Associates,

During this Jubilee year of Pilgrimage of the Missionary Icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, this Feast of the Visitation of Mary has special significance for us. The Missionary Icons blessed by Pope Francis are continuing to visit the Provinces, Vice-Provinces, Regions and Communities of the Congregation as we continue our Jubilee celebrations.

Every week in Rome, we receive news about this extraordinary pilgrimage, and I am sure that you have followed many of these events in ScalaNews. Mary, Our Mother of Perpetual Help, continues to visit her people today, just as she visited and served Elizabeth so many years ago.

As we prepare for the Novena and the Feast of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, I would like to reflect with you on the meaning and purpose of this Pilgrimage of the Missionary Icon. This visitation of the Icon is truly a moment of grace and jubilee, 'the year of the Lord's favour'. I invite you to reflect together on our mission with Mary to be prophetic Witnesses of the Redeemer today.

**Mandate of Blessed Pope Pius IX: "Make Her Known"**

On December 11, 1865, Blessed Pope Pius IX entrusted the original Icon to care of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. The Holy Father gave us a missionary mandate: "Make her known to the whole world!" From the moment of the restoration of the Icon to public veneration on April 26, 1866, and up to the present jubilee, Redemptorist missionaries have carried out this mandate with generous devotion and love. This Icon is one of the best known and most loved images of Mary across the world. The incredible celebrations of this jubilee year bear testimony to the fidelity of the Congregation to that missionary mandate of Pius IX.

We may be tempted to say: "Mission accomplished!" However, I believe that would be a mistake. Together, we are still called to make her known, not only across the globe in this present age, but also for future generations. This Icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help continues to carry a very relevant message of hope and love for all people. We are still called to make her known and loved today.



## Mandate of Pope Francis: The Mission of Mary Today

On November 24, 2013, Pope Francis gave us the Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium*. In this wonderful programmatic document, the Holy Father calls all of us to be missionary-disciples and spirit-filled evangelizers in a 'Church which goes forth' (EG 20). In this context, he concludes his Apostolic Exhortation by presenting the Mission of Mary, the Mother of Evangelization in the Church today (EG 284 – 288).

In these wonderful paragraphs, which echo the Mariology of St. Alphonsus Liguori in a remarkable way, the Holy Father presents us with a new missionary mandate: **Accompany Mary in her Mission today!** I believe that this mandate must find resonance in the heart of every Redemptorist missionary and every one of our communities. In fact, the gospel with which Pope Francis begins his reflection on Mary is the gospel passage for the Feast of Our Mother of Perpetual Help (John 19:26-30).

The Holy Father writes that from the Cross, Jesus entrusted Mary with a 'special saving mission', to accompany us as a mother. "Only after doing so did Jesus now recognize that 'all was now finished'" (EG 285). Mary journeys with us as a mother, so that we might read in this maternal image all the mysteries of the Gospel, all the mysteries of Redemption.

Then Pope Francis offers us six very important dimensions of the mission of Mary in the world today:

1. She teaches us how to transform the world into 'our common home' (*Laudato si'*) with tenderness and maternal love.
2. Mary embraces in friendship and brings joy to all those in need, sensitive to their human situation. This missionary accompaniment is a theme developed further in *Amoris laetitia*.
3. Like her Son, Mary has compassion and mercy for all those who suffer, understanding their pain from her own experience. In *Misericordiae vultus*, Francis invites us to make this mission our own, in union with Jesus the Redeemer.
4. Mary is a sign of hope in the struggle for justice. She knows the sorrow of the 'birth pangs'. In her *Magnificat*, she speaks of justice with the 'homely warmth' of tenderness. She teaches us the 'revolutionary nature of love and tenderness' (EG 288) to transform and heal the world.
5. As a missionary-disciple, Mary 'draws near' to God's people and 'accompanies them through life'. Mary shows us the meaning of solidarity! She walks by our side. She is faithful and constant.
6. In the Acts of the Apostles, and in her shrines, Mary creates spaces for gathering 'pilgrims' together, especially the poor and suffering. She prays with them as together these pilgrims await the outpouring of the Spirit.





## From Renewed Devotion to Prophetic Mission

Pope Francis is calling us today to grow in our knowledge of Mary as a real person – human like us, and an Icon of God's maternal love. The gospels offer us a powerful portrait of this woman who is truly our sister. This call invites us to renew our devotion to her so that it also renews our mission with her in our wounded world.

In the *Glories of Mary*, St. Alphonsus makes the frequent assertion that in the Blessed Virgin Mary, God's power meets God's compassion. Mary not only feels great tenderness toward us, but it is God's will that she also enjoys the power to help us. This is a particularly liberating message for the poor since in their experience those who love them can do little for them and those who have the power to help them are not interested in them. For St. Alphonsus, Mary's mission in the Church is intensely apostolic. His devotion to Mary is at the heart of his conviction that he is sent to the abandoned and the poor with the Good News of liberation, forgiveness and redemption.

Mary knows how to hold together the struggle for justice with maternal tenderness. Without this tenderness and mercy, the struggle for justice can become ideology. If it does, it will not lead to liberation, but to another form of oppression. But tenderness without justice can lead to a kind of sentimental acceptance of 'anything goes', which never challenges to maturity and growth and freedom.

Mary holds together the twin virtues of contemplation and compassion. Without compassion, contemplation will run the risk of narcissism, turning us in on ourselves. This may become the very kind of auto-reference that Pope Francis criticizes in *Evangelii gaudium*, which prevents the Church from going forth, going beyond to reach out and include.

Mary holds together in unity prayer and action. This is absolutely vital for the missionary-disciple. Prayer without action will lead to 'devotionalism' without mission. And action without prayer runs the risk of becoming a frenetic activism, disperse and unfocused, which will not be sustainable in the long term.

As the first 'missionary-disciple', Mary teaches us that devotion leads to mission, and mission leads us back to devotion. This integration of devotion and mission is fundamental to the Redemptorist charism and our *Vita Apostolica*. With Mary, following the teaching of St. Alphonsus, we know that we cannot have authentic devotion without intensely apostolic mission. And our mission will be deepened and sustained by our devotion.

## WITNESSES OF THE REDEEMER: In solidarity for mission to a wounded world

Our mandate and mission with Our Mother of Perpetual Help is *not only* to make her known. While it is important to continue this mandate, especially for future generations, today we are called to do so much more. Pope Francis reminds us that our mission today must be to



accompany Mary in *HER* mission as a missionary disciple of Jesus the Redeemer! The mission of the Redemptorist family with the Missionary Icon mirrors our theme for the sexennium.

The Mission of Our Mother of Perpetual Help is to live as a prophetic Witness of Jesus the Redeemer. Perhaps Her mission can be summarized with four key words: Accompany, Gather, Pray and Struggle for Justice.

- **ACCOMPANY** the abandoned and the poor with compassion, tenderness and maternal love. This accompaniment requires true **solidarity**, to 'draw near' with a commitment to accompany through life, to be faithful and constant especially in challenging and difficult situations.
- **GATHER** God's people as pilgrims, especially the poor and the suffering. Create safe places where the abandoned and the poor can come together for **encounter**.
- **PRAY** in the midst of God's people. Together, in the light of the Word of God, the 'signs of the times', and the experience of the poor, we must prayerfully discern how to act with compassion and mercy, justice and love. This prayer, especially 'prayer for others' is an essential element of true devotion-mission.
- **STRUGGLE** for justice with the revolutionary power of love and tenderness. Our devotion moves us into prayerful solidarity for the transformation and healing of our wounded world. This struggle for justice is the consequence of a deeply rooted faith in the Incarnation.

### The Concrete Challenge for the Redemptorist Family Today

As we began our jubilee celebrations in honour of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, I asked each Unit to consider a special social project in favour of the abandoned and the poor to mark this important celebration. Some of the Provinces and Vice-Provinces did take concrete action to support a shelter for women and children, another with funds to assist refugees, others in different ways. Of course, such projects are not limited to the Jubilee Year, and any Unit might decide to make such a commitment under the patronage of Perpetual Help at any time.

However, in this jubilee year of the Pilgrimage of the Missionary Icon, I ask every Shrine, Sanctuary, Parish, and Mission Team and Redemptorist Community to undertake a prayerful reflection on our mission with Our Mother of Perpetual Help today. We have made her known, and we continue to make her known. Pope Francis has called us to reflect on her role as a missionary-disciple today, and to accompany her in her mission to our wounded world. How might we do this? I ask the whole Redemptorist Family to engage in reflection together on this call in local and Provincial communities. Perhaps you might use those four words above to help you in your reflections: Accompany, Gather, Pray, Struggle.





- How do we accompany the poor and the abandoned, the wounded and the suffering, with compassion, tenderness and maternal love? In what concrete ways can we be in solidarity with migrants and refugees, with the victims of human trafficking, with young people and street children, with addicts and homeless? How can we accompany young families and the elderly members of our communities? How can we accompany those struggling to make sense of today's world, those in despair, those who have lost hope?
- Where might we create spaces to gather God's people, safe places where real encounter can take place? What facilities might we use in our shrines or parishes, communities and schools, where people can meet one another, perhaps take part in formation programs or discussions, or moments of socializing and sharing? How can our Churches become more welcoming, especially for the stranger? Are the confessionals inviting and are there spaces for the sacrament of reconciliation?
- All of our Churches and Shrines, communities and facilities, offer possibilities for prayer and reflection. In many places, we are strengthening and renewing the practice of the Perpetual Novena. Do the prayers we use truly reflect the concrete experience and situations among our people? Do they move us from personal intentions to praying for others, and addressing the needs of the society in which we are praying? Do we invite others to prayerful discernment with the Word of God, the 'signs of the times' and their own lives? Do our Novena Prayers integrate and reflect the renewed teaching on Evangelization, on the Family, on the care of our Common Home, and on Mercy? Do our prayers encourage and empower lay leadership?
- Does our devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help draw us into a deeper commitment in the struggle for justice? Like Mary, do we hold justice and tenderness together, so that the revolutionary power of mercy, compassion and love can transform our world for all? How do we express our passion for justice in concrete statements and actions? How do we do this in our actual situation and circumstances? What formation for action for justice can we offer through the mission of Our Mother of Perpetual Help today?

An **Appeal**: I invite you to send me the fruit of your reflections and dialogue, and the concrete action plan arising from this, if possible by October 31, 2017. This will help not only to acknowledge how the Spirit is moving among us, but also might serve as an inspiration to other Units as we live out our Devotion-Mission mandate in the worldwide Redemptorist Congregation and family.

### **Conclusion and Prayer**

As we continue together to celebrate this Jubilee Pilgrimage of the Missionary Icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help throughout the world, may it be a time of grace and renewal for the whole Redemptorist Family.



During this Jubilee, we have joyfully celebrated our mandate to 'make her known to the whole world'. Wherever we have gone, she has accompanied us. Often, she has gone before us and opened the door for our presence and mission – in Haiti, in Korea, in Ghana to give just a few examples. Mary accompanies us in our mission. Can we accompany her in her Mission and become ever more authentic and prophetic Witnesses of the Redeemer in solidarity for mission to a wounded world?

In a few days, we will celebrate the great Solemnity of Pentecost. Gathered with the disciples in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, Mary prayed for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which she had received at the Annunciation. She prayed that this spirit would transform them into apostles: Missionary-Disciples and prophetic Witnesses of the Redeemer, her Son and our brother. May her prayers accompany us now so that the Holy Spirit will guide all our reflection and planning as we respond more deeply to the call to be missionary-disciples with Mary today – authentic and prophetic Witnesses of the Redeemer in our wounded world!

Your brother in the Redeemer,

Michael Brehl, C.Ss.R.,  
Superior General

