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WITNESSES OF THE REDEEMER:
In Solidarity for Mission to a Wounded World

Witnesses to the Redeemer in the 'Digital Age'

Dear Confreres, Sisters, Lay Associates and friends,

This week, we remember the witness of five Blessed Confreres. Blessed Gennaro Sarnelli continues to call us to live in authentic and prophetic solidarity with the most abandoned and the poor – our wounded sisters and brothers to whom we are sent. He was creative in his ministry of evangelization, exploring new avenues of communication through the publication of pamphlets and books, as well as closeness to the people, especially to women and children, so often exploited by human trafficking even in his day.

Two hundred years later, the witness of the Ukrainian Martyrs is no less creative and effective. Through their witness to faithfulness in the midst of persecution and war they lived in authentic and prophetic solidarity with their suffering brothers and sisters to offer hope and strength. They also pioneered creative methods of evangelization through the underground Church, through short publications, and through simple preaching.

Both Gennaro Sarnelli and the Ukrainian Martyrs are authentic witnesses to the Redeemer whose lives continue to speak to us today about our call to revitalize and live more fully our Redemptorist *Vita Apostolica*. Like them, we must respond to the call to be authentic and prophetic witnesses to the Redeemer today through creative and innovative evangelization.

Today we find ourselves in a changing social landscape, in the complex process of secularization and globalization. As an institution mandated to preach the Good News to the poor, the Church's influence is declining. This is especially true when it comes to influencing social or moral issues. It is also true of what we refer to as "traditional media." In many parts of the world, the influence of Radio and TV is on the decline, especially among the younger generation. Traditional publications, books, newspapers and magazines, are also struggling.

In the last few decades, the developments in social media and communication have been phenomenal. Today, such media as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Viber, chats and groups, news alerts and podcasts have much greater influence than our traditional preaching in the



wounded world. Increasingly we live and operate in a digital world. Decision 37 of the 25th General Chapter is the beginning of a response to this reality:

Each of the five Conferences of the Congregation will appoint a confrere who will undergo study and training in the area of Communication. He will then assume responsibility for the Communication needs of the Conference and act as a direct link or liaison person with the Units of the Conference and the Office of Communications of the Congregation. He will also be available to work with the various Formation Programs of the Conference to ensure that future Redemptorists are equipped to avail of the evangelizing possibilities of various forms of new media.

Decision 13 encourages the whole Congregation to take seriously the challenge to enter this digital world as Witnesses to the Redeemer, and to discover how to effectively communicate the Good News to a new generation. The lives of Sarnelli and the Ukrainian Martyrs call us to follow their example – to live in solidarity with our sisters and brothers where they live today, and to give our lives for their sake.

The digital world brings new challenges. We know the negative impact that these multiple forms of media can have on society: fake news, addiction, bullying, violation of boundaries and privacy issues, to name but a few. Nevertheless, they also provide incredible opportunities to reach out and touch peoples' lives. These are opportunities never before known or available to us! Experience shows that social media can influence and change society for the better. We have a myriad of wonderful new tools for communication and we need to be trained to harness them well and use them for our Mission. But How? This is question many of us ask!

In the past, wherever Redemptorist missionaries were called to preach the Gospel, they began by learning the language of the people and immersing themselves in the culture. We are likewise challenged by the *digital* world, a world and culture in which many people live and speak a "particular" language. We need to travel to this world and learn its "language" if we are to immerse ourselves in and evangelize its culture.

Today the Congregation is undergoing a process of transformation, a process of restructuring. Currently, the five Conferences of the Congregation are involved in drawing up an Apostolic Plan which will highlight for us our Apostolic Priorities as we undertake our evangelizing work as Redemptorists. In this task, the 25th General Chapter calls us to reflect on how Communications and Media can serve the priorities and evangelizing work of the Congregation. It is also important that we strengthen our internal communication as part of this process. In doing so, we will come to know one another better and deepen our sense of solidarity.



The leadership of the Congregation, even if not involved directly with the digital world and social communication, must be aware of how it works. The 'digital world' has implications for our *Vita Apostolica*. For this reason, it is appropriate, if not essential, that every Unit create opportunities for the confreres and our lay partners to familiarize themselves with the effective and responsible use of social media and the different digital spaces which people inhabit. This is especially important in the process of initial formation.

In response to the challenges presented to us by the digital world, and in the Spirit of the 25th General Chapter, I urge every Conference to appoint and prepare the person who will receive the necessary preparation to animate and coordinate the communications and social media in their Conference. It is our hope that this person, in collaboration with the Conference Coordinator, will facilitate setting up an Office for Communications and Media in each Conference. This Office can also assist Units with no history of, or expertise in, social communication. I ask that this be done as soon as possible, preferably before the end of August this year.

In addition, the General Government, through the General Office for Communications, has mandated the Director of Communications to coordinate a Commission at the level of the Congregation which is already working on a strategic plan for communications. This plan will assist the Conferences and the Units as they also develop their Apostolic Plans. In view of this, I encourage each Unit to seriously consider specific and specialized preparation of some confreres or lay partners in this field.

We cannot over-estimate the importance of engaging with this digital world in order to ensure that we remain relevant and prophetic today. I ask major superiors throughout the Congregation to cooperate with the General Commission for Communications and Media as it prepares the strategic plan.

May Blessed Gennaro Sarnelli and the Ukrainian Martyrs, pioneers in searching for creative and prophetic ways to preach the Gospel ever anew, be both inspiration and example to us as we face the challenges of the digital world today. May Mary, Our Mother of Perpetual Help, continue to intercede for us in our missionary witness to her Son, our Redeemer and brother!

Your brother in Christ our Redeemer,

Michael Brehl, CSsR

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Superior General

