

## Message on the occasion of the Online Meeting with the Redemptorist Brothers

Dear Brothers,

1. It is a great joy for us in the General Government to meet you on the eve of the feast of our dear brother, St. Gerard Majella, a great missionary of our Congregation, who shaped his life through prayer, fraternal life in community and helping the poorest and most abandoned. Despite historical distance and contextual differences, St. Gerard continues to be a source of inspiration for all of us Redemptorist missionaries. In this meeting, I will not speak directly about St. Gerard, but I would like to take this opportunity to leave you with a message of encouragement in your consecrated life and mission, dear brother Redemptorist missionaries.
2. Consecrated life is facing profound transformations in the contemporary context, driven by cultural, social and ecclesial changes. The traditional model, rooted in rigid structures and centered on discipline, is giving way to more flexible and dialogic forms, attuned to the values of autonomy, diversity and service to humanity. Growing secularization challenges consecrated communities to redefine their place in society, seeking relevance in a culture that values subjectivity and individualism. In addition, declining vocations and aging professed members, along with the disappearance of some congregations, call for a renewal of both charism and mission, forcing them to adapt to new forms of evangelization and prophetic presence, with the goal of finding a new identity.<sup>1</sup> O'Murchu says that the cycle of a congregation is about 300 years, during which it either renews itself or disappears.<sup>2</sup> Thus, to remain faithful to its essence, consecrated life needs to be able to reimagine itself, remaining anchored in the Gospel, but also open to the signs of the times and the new spiritual and pastoral needs of the People of God. This People of God experiences “the joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties [...] especially of the poor and those who

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. TACCONI, Giuseppe. *Alla ricerca di nuove identità. Formazione e organizzazione nelle comunità religiose di vita apostolica attiva nel tempo di crisi*. Leumann (TO): Elledici, 2001, p. 38-45.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. O'MURCHU, Diarmuid. *Refundar la vida religiosa en el siglo XXVI*. Madrid: Sirena de los Vientos, 2020/ *La vita religiosa nel XXI secolo: la prospettiva della rifondazione*. USA: Orbis Book, 2016.

suffer, [which] are at once joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties of Christ's disciples" (GS 1).

3. Contemporary society is characterized by its fluidity, as Bauman points out, marked by constant change in values, roles and institutions. In this scenario, the certainties of the past are often replaced by a multiplicity of options, and "being" gives way to "doing and appearing." This generates a profound identity crisis at different levels. The instability of relationships, community ties and the conception of truth foster individualism and fragmentation, hindering a sense of belonging and continuity. In a world where identities are seen as temporary and changing constructs, the notion of a stable and perennial identity is in crisis, leading many to a relentless search for recognition and self-affirmation. This fluidity, as Bauman reminds us, manifests itself in all spheres: religious, social, professional, personal and relational, causing anguish and a sense of uprooting, as old forms of personal and communal understanding lose their ability to regulate and normalize. Here I wonder if this is not the reason why many brethren leave consecrated and priestly life, or why some religious brothers devote themselves to priestly ministry. If we are guided by a society that values "doing" and "appearing," it is evident that "being" becomes a hidden reality, part of the human mystery.
4. The Church, in general, remains heavily focused on priestly ministry, which reinforces a hierarchical and sacramental view of its mission and structure. Although this emphasis has theological underpinnings, it often obscures the essential role of religious brothers and laity in the life of the Church, relegating them to secondary or merely caring positions. This difficulty in thinking beyond a predominantly sacramental logic prevents the Church from fully appreciating the diversity of vocations and ministries that make up the Body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12). This view limits the role of the laity, especially in leadership and evangelization, and also marginalizes the prophetic and fraternal role of religious brothers, whose vocation is oriented more toward the silent witness of fraternity and service than toward sacramental ministry.
5. The identity of the religious brother consists in a free and conscious vocation to the consecrated life, as a response to Baptism, which is distinguished by the call to live fraternity and service to one's neighbor, incarnating the presence of Christ in the midst of the People of God, especially among the neediest. The mission of the brother is, first and foremost, a commitment to service in the building of a

Christian community, where human worth is not measured by hierarchical roles, but by a spirit of sharing, welcoming and solidarity. “The vocation and identity of the religious brother gain meaning in this dynamic, which is both integrative and complementary to the various ministries, but also promotes prophetic signs.”<sup>3</sup> Redemptorist Brothers share the same mission as the clerics of the Congregation but express this mission in a unique way through pastoral, educational, social and missionary work, being prophets of an inclusive and supportive Church, where fraternity is the key to everything.

6. Men and women religious take on an essential prophetic role in the current ecclesial context, presenting a way of being Church that is not based on hierarchy, but on the radical experience of fraternity. As the document *Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church* states, “the identity of the brother is a mystery of communion for mission. Central to this threefold perspective is the heart of the identity of the religious brother, namely: fraternity, as a gift that receives (mystery), as a gift that shares (communion) and as a gift (mission).”<sup>4</sup> Their witness challenges traditional ecclesiastical structures, promoting an inclusive and communitarian vision, where a person's value does not depend on his position within a hierarchy or his actions, but on his capacity to love and serve. This critical and alternative position to the centralization of clerical power is an urgent call for the Church to rediscover its essence as the People of God, in which all are called to be disciple-missionaries, sharing equally in mission and responsibility for the Kingdom of God.
7. Dear Brothers, I encourage you, as religious, to strengthen your identity and mission within the Congregation, emphasizing the richness and uniqueness of your brother or sister's vocation in the Church. It is a matter of constantly reaffirming their fundamental role as an active and prophetic presence in the midst of the People of God, emphasizing that their contribution is as indispensable as that of ordained ministers, without falling into a dualistic vision of “us and you.” “Before external works, the mission of making Christ present in

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<sup>3</sup> CONGREGAZIONE PER GLI ISTITUTI DI VITA CONSACRATA E LE SOCIETÀ DI VITA APOSTOLICA. *Identità e missione del religioso fratello nella Chiesa*, n. 12.

<sup>4</sup> CONGREGAZIONE PER GLI ISTITUTI DI VITA CONSACRATA E LE SOCIETÀ DI VITA APOSTOLICA. *Identità e missione del religioso fratello nella Chiesa*, n. 4.

the world through personal witness is fulfilled.”<sup>5</sup> The congregation breathes with two lungs and we are one missionary body (cf. Const. 2). Therefore, we must change that mentality that there are two classes within the congregation. We are Redemptorist missionaries who complement each other in proclaiming the Gospel. It is essential that, from the Redemptorist charism and their missionary activity, they communicate the specific value and witness of their consecrated life, showing that their vocation is not only functional but essential to the apostolic life of the Congregation.

8. Brothers should be active vocation promoters, enthusiastically presenting the figure of the Redemptorist missionary brother as a sign of fraternity, simplicity and committed service. By their example of life, they can arouse new vocations, making it clear that the Redemptorist mission is realized not only in priestly ministry, but also in the witness of fraternity and in solidarity presence with the poorest and most abandoned.
9. I would like to remind you that being a Redemptorist brother involves a wide range of activities that are in line with our charism. The professionalization of brothers is essential in several areas, such as social work, law, psychology, communication, nursing and administration, among others. However, this should not become an imperative. We must be careful not to run the risk of becoming professional in doing things and forgetting our consecration, which is based on the mystery of Christ the Redeemer. It is also important not to create a mentality of division between trained brothers and those who are not. There is room in the congregation for all who wish to serve, whether at the door, in the garden, in the sacristy, or as university professors and researchers. We must not be carried away by the siren song of “doing and appearing,” for this can lead us into the deep sea of loss of identity and emptiness. This mentality can be fought with a deep spiritual life and fraternal coexistence. I believe that St. Gerard is very relevant for us and can teach us to be Redemptorist missionaries based on simplicity, deep spirituality and encounter with others, without distinction of persons.
10. Dear Brothers, on behalf of the Congregation, I am deeply grateful to you for your witness of life and your dedication to the Redemptorist mission, which is

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<sup>5</sup> CONGREGAZIONE PER GLI ISTITUTI DI VITA CONSACRATA E LE SOCIETÀ DI VITA APOSTOLICA. *Identità e missione del religioso fratello nella Chiesa*, n. 28.

based on proclaiming abundant redemption to the poorest and most marginalized, following the example of Jesus Christ. You, faithful to the mission of proclaiming the Good News to the neediest, are a living sign of God's redeeming love in the world. We gratefully acknowledge the pastoral and missionary work they do, especially in popular missions, sanctuaries, parishes, spirituality centers, sacristies, social projects and migration centers. In these places they promote human dignity, welcome and justice, always guided by a spirit of fraternity and service, where their presence heals so many wounds and strengthens the faith of many. The Redemptorist brothers, with their witness of a simple and committed life, are missionaries of hope, following in the footsteps of the Redeemer, and should be a living reminder of this for the clergy as well.

May Brother Gerard, who became a saint because of his simplicity and for seeking to do God's will in his daily life, help all of us Redemptorist missionaries to be a Congregation that truly lives fraternity as an evangelical principle. May Mary, Mother of Perpetual Help, protect each of you.

Fr. Rogério Gomes, C.Ss.R.

Superior General

Roma, 15 October 2024

*Original: Spanish*