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Dear Confreres,

Greetings during this Lenten Season – may the Merciful Father bless you with hope, joy and compassion and make all of us true missionaries of mercy in the Spirit of St. Alphonsus.

As you already know, Venerable Maria Celeste Crostarosa will be beatified on June 18, 2016 in Foggia. I write to invite you to join with all our Redemptoristine sisters in joy and thanksgiving as they finally see their foundress proposed to all the people of God as an example of generous ‘sequela Christi’ – ‘following Christ’. The joy and thanksgiving of our sisters must also be our joy and thanksgiving on account of the communion that unites us in the great Redemptorist family, and especially, for the important role that Mother Celeste has had in our origins.

In this event, we renew the fraternal feeling our communities always experience with regard to our Redemptoristine Sisters. On this occasion, it is indeed good to remember the joyous experience of St Gerard. Tannoia tells us that on his deathbed, “one day, and it was September 24, turning to a layman, Gerard said: ‘Today in Foggia, Mother Maria Celeste went to God.’ It was taken for nonsense; but in fact, as it became known, on that day Sister Maria Celeste passed into eternity, and it was at the same time that he had said so. There must have been something more between him and the servant of God, but that we do not know.” (*Of the life of the Servant of God Brother Gerard Majella of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer*, Part II, chap. XI).

The sharing of this joy and thanksgiving naturally becomes trusting prayer and fraternal solidarity, so that the Order can draw from this event a new momentum in creative fidelity to their specific vocation. As their *Constitutions* note, “the Father calls us today to be a living Memorial – a Viva Memoria – a constant Reminder – of all that the Son accomplished for our salvation during His life on earth. It is in this way that the Redeemer is able today to accomplish His work of salvation in us and through us.” (n. 5).

The beatification of Mother Celeste will take place shortly after the recently concluded Year of Consecrated Life. Following the indications of Pope Francis in his Apostolic Letter, we are challenged to “look to the past with gratitude” in order to learn to “live the present with passion” and thus “to embrace the future with hope.” These are three inseparable dimensions of fidelity to our vocation.

We remember that Mother Celeste is part of the charismatic richness of our origins. It is true that she was soon marginalized by the move away from Scala in those crucial moments in which our missionary community was taking shape. But it is equally true that her charismatic intuition continued to be present in the arduous process of drafting our rules and also through the fraternal friendship that St. Alphonsus and the other early Redemptorists continued to nurture



with her and with the Sisters. It is certainly the task of historians to further study all this. It is proper, however, that we do not allow the richness of her spiritual message to remain without fruit. We look to the past with gratitude.

Today, Mother Celeste encourages us to deepen the '*copiosa redemptio*', the heart of our spirituality, as a mystery of merciful communion. In the preface of the *Rules* that she wrote for the Redemptoristines, we read these words which God spoke to her heart: "With desire, I have desired to give the world my Spirit, and to communicate this Spirit to my rational creatures, to live with them and in them until the end of the world. I gave them my only Son with infinite love, and for him, I offered them my divine Consoler Spirit, to divinize them in life, justice and truth, and to enclose them all in my predilection, in him, the Word, the Son of love. The entire diffusion of my grace, justice and truth is through him. Eternal life is through him."

Our world, in which barriers and walls, indifference and opposition become ever stronger, has more need than ever of this proclamation. As Redemptorists, we must not tire of proclaiming that the history of humanity carries within itself a plan of communion: a plan entrusted to our responsibility. To 'live the present with passion', we must live this divine plan as encounter, dialogue, mutual gift. Above all, we must realize God's plan for communion by taking the first step toward the other, just as God always takes the first step towards us, despite our many refusals: "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Mt 5,23-24).

We cannot be missionaries of this merciful communion without constantly making of it an experience on the personal and community level. Our *Constitutions* highlight this experience: "Since the members are called to continue the presence of Christ and his mission of redemption in the world, they choose the person of Christ as the centre of their life, and strive day by day to enter ever more intimately into personal union with him. Thus, at the heart of the community, to form it and sustain it, is the Redeemer himself and his Spirit of love. And the closer their union with Christ, the stronger will become their union with each other." (n. 23).

In her preface to the *Rules*, Mother Celeste continued: "Therefore, imprint his life and the true likeness of his imitation on your spirit, and become on earth living animated portraits of my beloved Son, since he only is your leader, your beginning. You will bear him as the life of your heart, and as the end of your beginning, as shepherd of your flock and as teacher of your spirit. Your life will be governed by the truths he taught in the holy Gospels, where all the treasures of heaven are gathered, the source of life; you participate, still as a wayfarer, in the eternal riches in my beloved Son of love, in whom all have being and life".

These words help us to better understand the mystical and spiritual depths of what it means to 'follow the example' of the Redeemer, which St. Alphonsus sums up as the 'intent' of the Redemptorist missionary community. Our *Constitutions* re-propose it from the very beginning: Our Congregation truly "follows the example of Christ in the apostolic life, which comprises at one and the same time a life specially dedicated to God and a life of missionary work." (n. 1). I believe that only in this one mystical-apostolic perspective – the *Vita Apostolica* – is it possible to continue the renewal of our communities, allowing the Spirit to mold us. As Mother Celeste stressed, this makes of us the 'living portrait' of Christ.

Blessed Maria Celeste also stimulates us to renew the fraternal style of our Apostolic Community through which we respond to our missionary vocation. In the first rule, she reminded the Redemptoristines that all their lives must be a witness of 'mutual love', according



to the words of Christ: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.” (Jn 15.12 -13).

Mother Celeste adds: “One should not turn away from his example: ‘I came down from heaven to give all of myself to you and to give my life not only for my friends, but for my enemies still, to glorify my Father and for your salvation ... Therefore you will give your entire soul to your neighbors: your intellect, raising it to my mercy for their benefit ... your memory, with forgiveness from the heart, not remembering offenses received ... the will, loving them dearly ... your heart with its affections, sharing in their afflictions, infirmities and hardships for love of me ... This will involve your body and your senses for their benefit ... In short: your body and your life are ready to sacrifice themselves, if charity requires it, for their eternal salvation, and as I have done, so also must you’.”

Blessed Maria Celeste Crostarosa teaches us that without this atmosphere characterized by mutual giving, our communities will not be truly missionary. Our *Constitutions* remind us that, in fact, “The whole purpose of community life is to have the members, like the apostles (cf. Mark 3:14; Acts 2:42-45; 4:32), in a spirit of genuine brotherly union, combine their prayers and deliberations, their labours and sufferings, their successes and failures, and their material goods as well, for the service of the Gospel” (n. 22). For the rest, only merciful communities can give credibility to the missionary proclamation of mercy. In this spirit, may we ‘embrace the future with hope’.

Your brother in the Redeemer,



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