

A LETTER OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO FR JOSEPH TOBIN, CSSR,  
SUPERIOR  
GENERAL OF THE REDEMPTORISTS CONCERNING "THE YEAR OF ST.  
GERARD 2004"

I am very pleased to learn that your religious Family is preparing to celebrate an extraordinary "Year of Sr. Gerard", which notes the happy coincidence of two anniversaries concerning one of its more illustrious children, Saint Gerard Majella: the centennial of his canonization (December 11, 1904) and the 250th anniversary of his death (October 16, 1755). I joyfully join you, Most Reverend Father, the Confreres and the devotees of so great a disciple of Saint Alphonsus Maria de Liguori in giving praise and thanks to the Lord for "great things" that God never ceases to accomplish in the little ones and in the poor.

Truly Gerard Majella is one of the little ones in whom God has made shine the power of his mercy! He entered the Institute of Redemptorist missionaries at a young age with the express intention "to become a saint." The cheerful and confident "yes" to the divine will, supported by constant prayer and a strong penitential spirit, produces in him a charity ever attentive to the spiritual and material needs of his neighbor, especially the most underprivileged.

Even without any formal education, Gerard penetrated the mystery of the Kingdom of heaven, which, because of his simplicity, shown to all who approached him. He felt compelled by the urgency of the conversion of sinners and worked for this untiringly; he showed the same zeal in supporting and encouraging those called to religious life.

The fame of his holiness and confidence in his intercession continued to grow after his death. Even today his tomb is the destination of numerous pilgrimages from Italy and from many countries on all continents. Countless believers turn to him confidently in their times of trial.

Saint Gerard is a dazzling example of such a spiritual attitude through his love for the Crucified and the Eucharist and for his devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. I urge you to follow his same spiritual journey and, like him, to remain faithful to your own charism without fearing the inevitable difficulties that accompany every true renewal. I addressed this point in the above mentioned Message to your recent General Chapter: "The Constitutions of your Institute invite you to identify the urgent pastoral needs of the moment, keeping in mind that your ministry is not characterized by any specific type of activity, but rather by loving service to people and groups who are most abandoned and poor because of their social and spiritual condition. Our world today awaits an open and honest witness to the truth, wisdom and power of the Cross.

The enculturation of the faith and rapid social change present many challenges to the proclamation of the Gospel. Hence, the clear

proclamation of the wisdom of the Cross should always be united to an energetic commitment to proclaim the "Gospel of charity", above all to the little ones and the poor, as did Saint Gerard Majella, who understood so well the mystery of the Cross, a mystery that sheds light on the dramatic force of sin and, at the same time, proclaims the liberating and healing force of divine mercy. Thus he prayed: "Oh my God, if I could but convert to you as many sinners as there are grains of sand in the seas across the earth, as the branches of the trees, as the leaves of the fields, as the atoms of the air, as the stars of the heavens, or the rays of the sun and of the moon, all creatures of the earth!".

Gerard did not spare energy, prayers or penance for sinners. His love did not allow him to remain indifferent before their choices and their condition; his heartfelt desire was to draw all to a fruitful reception of the sacrament of Reconciliation.

A pervasive weakening of a sense of sin and, consequently, of the importance of the sacrament of the Reconciliation, permeates society today. This challenges the pastoral work of the Church and particularly, the apostolic action of your religious Congregation, which truly finds in the announcement of redemption in Christ one of its essential elements. Dear Redemptorists, continue to imitate your saintly Founder by remaining, always sensitive to sinners and ready to welcome them in the sacrament of Reconciliation with the tenderness of a father and the wisdom of a physician. Continue to nourish the same passion of Saint Gerard, who spent himself completely for the salvation of souls.

If he was concerned that sinners would recover their spiritual life through conversion and the sacrament of Penance, Saint Gerard Majella also nurtured a particular care for newborn life and expectant mothers, especially those in physical and spiritual difficulties. This is why even today he is invoked as a special Protector of pregnant women. Such loving concern, which is so typical of him, constitutes for you and for all your faithful believers an incentive to love, defend and always serve human life.

The threats that continue to arise against life are well known, especially those that menace the life at its very beginning. We must reflect, above all, on the worrisome spread of a "culture of the death" that pushes a large sector of public opinion to justify crimes against life in name of the rights of personal freedom and, for that reason, claim its legitimization by the State.

I hope that the Year of St. Gerard may contribute to make even more convincing the effort of Christians to oppose this culture of death and bring about concrete and persuasive gestures that serve the culture of life.

Therefore, Most Reverend Father, on such a significant occasion I would like to entrust to you and to all the Redemptorists the mission work in an even more decisive way to spread the "Gospel of Life." In

fidelity to the Alphonsian tradition, let your theological and moral reflection be at the service of life, developing such reflection from the starting point of those situations where life is less protected and defended. This is a concrete way to continue the work of Saint Gerard Majella and be witness of hope and builders of a new humanity.

Moved by such sentiment and hopes, I implore from the Giver of all good abundant graces and heavenly gifts for you, Most Reverend Father, for the whole Alphonsian family and for all who entrust themselves to the intercession of Saint Gerard, sending with affection a special Blessing for all.

Given at Castel Gandolfo, August 6, 2004

*Joannes Paulus P.P. II*