

The spiritual, pastoral and missionary message of the Icon of the Lady of Perpetual Help

Presentation to the Campo Grande Conference in Brazil, May 2014

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1

INTRODUCTION

To grasp the spiritual, pastoral and missionary message that the icon of the Lady of Perpetual Help transmits to us, a path is required of us. This is something difficult, for our times, where consumption is a religion, and where “everything right now” is the first of all the commandments. This is the path advocated by the Redemptorist Constitutions (# 24), that of contemplation: a road often evoked in intentions, but in fact, little practiced.

We can consider various definitions of contemplation. I consider it particularly significant that which is used in a document on religious life a few years ago, which sees it “basically as the theological response of faith, hope and love with which the believer is open to revelation and communion with the living God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. The effort to concentrate the eye and the heart on God, which we call contemplation, becomes the highest and fullest act of the spirit, the act which even today can and should be at the apex of human activity.”¹

In the daily life of men and women today, the purified gaze of contemplation manifests itself in a very precise attitude: that of one who accepts life as a gift, freeing oneself from the obsessive law of efficiency and production. Gratitude and joy are unmistakable signs of this attitude.

At first glance, the contemplative journey is a very short one: it goes from the mind to the heart. In reality, the distance is like that of an abyss: it starts with a look, but the ultimate goal is the mystery of God. It goes from the visible to the invisible. It moves from the flesh, which alone is not much use, toward the Spirit that gives life (Jn 6:63). As we can imagine, it is not a road free of obstacles.

Besides this journey, which is essentially personal and unique, it seems important to me to highlight some conditions for making this trip fruitful. In the specific case of our Icon, these conditions examine it in its more concrete sense of “artefact,” before looking at its wider theological or spiritual message.

Some preconditions

The first condition is to consider the place in which our Icon was written.² The Venetian-Cretan School, from whose workshops it came, asserts itself about the time the Byzantine Empire fell. To escape

¹ THE CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life* (1980), 1. The definition given by the Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2715 could also be useful: “Contemplative prayer is the gaze of faith fixed on Jesus. ‘I look at him and he looks at me’ said the peasant of Ars in prayer before the tabernacle at the time of his saintly curate. This attention to Jesus is a renunciation of the ‘I’. His look purifies the heart. The light of the gaze of Jesus illumines the eyes of our heart. It teaches us to see everything in the light of his truth and his compassion for all people. Contemplation also turns its gaze on the mysteries of Christ’s life. In this way it leads to the ‘inner knowledge of the Lord,’ so to love and follow him more.”

² The artistic and historical origin of the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help is far from being completely understood. The few documentary elements are accompanied by other legendary or traditional. Cf. in particular CATTAPAN, M., *Precisazioni riguardanti la storia della Madonna del Perpetuo Soccorso* [Precise information regarding the history of the Madonna of Perpetual Help], in *Spicilegium Historicum CSSR*, 15 (1967), 353-381 e FERRERO, F., *Santa Maria del Perpetuo Socorro: Un icono de la Santa Madre de Dios, Virgen de la Pasión* [Holy Mary of Perpetual Help: An Icon of the Holy Mother of God, Virgin of the Passion], PS Editorial, Madrid 1994. The restoration took place in 1992 and the

Islam, an Orthodox colony settled in Crete, which was Venetian territory. It was one more step in the evolution of iconography. East and West met in admirable harmony, and our Icon shows the vestiges. If in this one the Eastern tradition speaks through symbols and themes that are proper to it, including the stylized face of Mary and the thread-like design of the hands, then the West reveals the influence of Italian art in the humanized figure of the child and in a new combination of colors.

This may seem a technical fact, the preserve of experts. But in fact it is laden with pastoral consequences. Let us think about how this image evolved over the centuries, further humanizing the figures, making them lose what is proper to an icon: the statues or bas-reliefs so frequent in Latin America are an example of this. They are artifacts in which the people of God recognize themselves with spontaneous enthusiasm. People find something in the work that expresses their same faith. The simplest identify with the artist, who is capable of giving aesthetic form to the feelings they themselves feel. If this has favored the enormous popularity of the "Madonna of the Redemptorists," then we must not forget that this should be read with the rigor proper to an icon, which as such "will always have a complex language, only apparently simple (...). It is an image and at the same time a word, it is revelation and at the same time *anamnesis*, remembrance."³

The second condition prior to our journey is to consider the era in which this Icon was written. Fabriciano Ferrero says that in the fourteenth century "Christian symbolic art came to the end of its creative process."⁴ Therefore our Icon "collects, as in a synthesis, the fundamental elements of preceding iconography. Even more accentuated in the Virgin of the Passion (much associated with the iconographic type of *Eleusa*) are the elements coming from the *Hodigitria* type, which preserves the sacredness and the Christocentric character of this type of icon, without losing, however, the theological and maternal significance of the *Eleusa*. On the contrary, it constitutes an iconographic and theological synthesis of both types and themes. (...) Without this relationship between the icons of the Virgin of the Passion with the previous iconographic themes, the Icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help would be incomprehensible."⁵

This also may appear to be an item for specialists. But in fact it helps to focus our contemplative gaze. Just think of the letters that surround the head of Mary: *MP ΘΥ = mater teoû*. They make us look to her as the *theotokos*. But by reversing the flow of time, the story line in which the mystery of the Incarnation is revealed, with little effort we remember the first seven ecumenical councils, with the reflection and the discussions that culminated in 431 at Ephesus with the solemn definition of Mary as Mother God. Our eye makes itself a camera lens, with at least two focal points: the first looks at what is in front, the second opens itself to a theological and spiritual path that lasted for centuries.

The third condition is to consider the reason for which any true icon has been designed, and the environment in which it was born and has been used. It arose – and still stands – at the service of an enormous work of evangelization. Wherever it arrived, it was a way to teach, preach and celebrate the sacraments.

Some wrongly believe the icon to be a sort of *biblia pauperum*. In fact, if in the West this latter served as a scenic representation of biblical stories in favor of uneducated people, in the East the icon was placed at a very different level. It lent itself to some substantial catechesis, considering it too – as just mentioned – a result of the settling of theological disputes, a harmonious synthesis of different titles attributed to Jesus or to Mary. But to generate any genuine icon the liturgical context was needed as well as an atmosphere of prayer and fasting, without which no image was conceivable. Somehow we

new data acquired raised questions (cf. MARRAZO, A., *Il restauro dell'icona della Madonna del Perpetuo Soccorso*, in *CSSR Communicationes*, Rome, n. 92 del 25.06.1992). What I say here about the origin of the Icon refers to the original project or composition (13th – 14th century), irrespective of the actual artifact, which is much more recent (17th century?).

³ SPIDLIK, T. – RUPNIK, M. I., *La fede secondo le icone [Faith according to the icons]*, Lipa, Rome 2000, 9.

⁴ FERRERO, F., *Santa Maria del Perpetuo Socorro: Un icono de la Santa Madre de Dios, Virgen de la Pasión*, PS Editorial, Madrid 1994, 143-144.

⁵ *Ibid.*

find this climate today, in the tears, in the supplications, in the penance, in the confident abandonment to the will of God that accompany the faithful to Our Lady of Perpetual Help in so many parts of the world.

In any case, for our contemplation of this image to be fruitful, we must enter the “womb” that generated it, and from which it continues to receive life.

To take to heart these conditions may prove more difficult for that part of the world – Redemptorist, but not exclusively – that is not accustomed to eastern spirituality. It is not simply a matter of “letting go” before a mystery which infinitely surpasses us, but to open ourselves to the dynamism of the Holy Spirit, the first iconographer. It is not simply to “receive” a light, more or less passively, but to make it our own because we in turn can reflect it on to others. More than just the individual details of the Icon, which also have their own language and therefore we must keep them in our reflection, contemplation requires us to let ourselves be carried away by the Icon in its entirety, by a mystery that has been made into an image. If exercised under certain conditions, “the veneration of the faithful is the continuation of the work.”⁶ What is at stake is the opening of oneself to the consuming fire of God’s love, the same as with any other language but with the same passion that animated the life and works of St. Alphonsus Liguori.

The Icon has its own theology

We must constantly remind ourselves that the icon is not a museum piece, nor one of those images that we usually multiply in our shrines to honor a saint or a title of the Virgin. The icon has its own theology. Ideally, we ought to place it inside the iconostasis, and from this context draw the most important conclusions. The iconostasis is a wall of icons. “Behind” the iconostasis the bread becomes the body and the wine becomes the blood of Christ. “In front of” the iconostasis, the people look at the images and by these they will be returned to the mystery. The iconostasis hides but at the same time reveals. It separates but at the deepest level unites the people and the celebrant. Somehow the icon participates in the “sacramental structure” proper to the faith, mentioned by *Lumen fidei* (n. 40), which adds: “the awakening of the faith passes through the awakening of a new sacramental sense of human life and of Christian existence, showing how the visible and the material open themselves towards the mystery of the eternal” (*ibid.*). On the other hand, it will take only a “trained” look at the Eucharist to make us see the profundity of the real (*Lumen fidei*, 44).

It is this look that makes the message proper to an icon unique, unrepeatable and somehow “personal.” Also this fact, intrinsically spiritual, is based on technical data: it is known that in the interpretation of the icons, objective and universally shared criteria do not exist. We can talk about a prevalent approach, but nothing more. The symbols of iconography are read differently according to the traditions (Russian, Greek-Byzantine, Slavic, etc.). The same can be said of colors: it is symptomatic that they are read differently from one author to the next.

This non univocal interpretation, at least of some elements of the icon, in my opinion is a resource and not a handicap. It opens the gate to that intimate relationship between the believer and God, which is precisely why it cannot be structured, nor thought of in a series. It is this belief that makes me “dare” to make a spiritual, pastoral and missionary reflection in light of the Lady of Perpetual Help.

I will follow some of the possible, numerous trails. I limit myself to four words

- Incarnation
- Passion
- Tenderness
- Redemption

⁶ RUPNIK M., *Il rosso della piazza d'oro [The red of the golden square]*, Lipa, Rome 2013, 238.

I will approach each of these words from time to time following the same path: *Contemplating the Icon – Together with the believing people – For the Redemptorist mission*. The reason I chose these passages is substantially rooted in our *Vita Apostolica*, that is in that intrinsic and natural bond that unites our relationship with God to our work for His Kingdom, allowing ourselves to be challenged by the faith of the simple and pure in heart. It is a bond that not only characterizes our service and our consecration, but the same spirituality we share with the laity.

But I am sure that any Redemptorist, or any of the faithful, looking at this image and praying in front of it, will know how to obtain other reasons, useful for their life in the Spirit and their mission in the world, whatever it is.

1. Incarnation

Contemplating the Icon

It is the icon as such, regardless of the titles by which it is venerated, that speaks to us of incarnation. "By its very existence each icon evokes the mystery of the Incarnation. Not in theory, but in practice, it affirms that humanity has the possibility of expressing God and that it has at its disposal a language to express its faith."⁷ It is one of the cornerstones of iconography: wood and colors can express the invisible.

In addition, "the question of the images is fundamental because it is tied closely to the very essence of Christianity, namely, **the incarnation** (...). The icon is a reflection of the prototype, and every icon is the reflection of the human and divine natures without mixing as in the person of Christ."⁸

Failure to understand this rule was the origin of iconoclasm, where the theological disputes, mingling with political and economic interests, fashioned reasons for incendiary destruction and death. Accepting this rule instead makes us enter into the logic of the icon: it expresses the inner life of the Church, and this life is an extension of a God who became one of us.

In the case of the Lady of Perpetual Help, she is also the subject represented to speak of incarnation. A mother and her baby, whom we know to be God. It is the event that makes us read the story and live life in a new light: "the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people and teaches us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live in this world, temperately, justly and devoutly" (Titus 2:11). Grace was made flesh, and in our Icon the left arm of Mary is a throne: just as the holy book in the eastern rite has the arm of the holy bishops as a seat.

A detail of this icon immediately attracts our attention: the right foot of Jesus, raised with respect to the left, while losing the sandal. In the canons of Byzantine iconography, the two feet represent the two natures of Christ, human and divine. The right, showing the sole barefoot, refers us to the wayfarer Christ, humble pilgrim of our roads

Even the hand of Mary which holds that of Jesus speaks to us of incarnation: provided we make the journey back already mentioned, seeing in the *Virgin of the Passion*, the *Hodigitria*, the one who shows us the way, Jesus.

The eight-pointed star that adorns the veil of Mary is an image of grace, of which Mary was full and that today still illuminates the life of the believer: the supreme way to both implement and continue the incarnation.

Finally, the colors. We think of the predominant one, the blue of the veil (*maphorion*) of the Virgin. It indicates "the transcendence in relation to all that is earthly and sensible."⁹ It is the same that

⁷ SENDLER, E., *L'icona immagine dell'invisibile. Elementi di teologia, estetica e tecnica [The icon image of the invisible. Elements of theology, aesthetics and technique]*, Paoline, Rome 1985, 229.

⁸ SENDLER, E., *L'icona...*, op. cit., 38.

we find in other images of the *Pantokrator* and the apostles, just to say that that transcendence has a human face. In its turn, the ocher color of the mantle (*himation*) of Jesus is a symbol of renunciation and self-denial, a reference to the *kenosis* of Christ, that though he was rich he became poor for us (2Cor 8:9).

Together with the believing people

“Holy Mary of the way” is one of the most beloved titles of the Christian people. It has always been so, if we keep in mind the iconographic tradition of *Hodigitria*. But in a confusing time such as ours, this title shines with all its charm. It responds to the way we think about life today. A very popular song, translated into several languages, is a witness to it. It is a symbol of the pilgrimage often made on foot by individuals or groups of faithful towards a shrine where the Lady of Perpetual Help is venerated.

The journey is a metaphor for the Incarnation because it places the person in an attitude of searching. Also, like the Magi, we are guided by a star, the same that we see in the Icon: bright enough, to proceed in the night. It is a star that sometimes hides itself. The fact that we can find it again also depends on human mediation. But even our very human and confused search is part of the incarnation.

Lumen fidei has described this metaphor with eloquent expressions: “faith sees to the extent that one walks” (n. 9). “Faith is knowledge linked to the passage of time, of which the word needs to pronounce itself: it is knowledge that is learned only in a journey of discipleship” (*Lumen fidei*, 29). If polytheism, which today is embodied in the proliferation of myths, is “moving aimlessly from one lord to another, ... who do not offer a way but a multiplicity of paths” (n. 13), “faith appears like a path of the gaze” (n. 30).

But we must go further, and open ourselves to incarnation in the broadest sense, such as the Lady of Perpetual Help suggests it to us.

The elements in it that speak to us of God made flesh, and that we have mentioned above, essentially remind us of what life has become, after Christ. If the metaphor of the bridge is sometimes used to describe what happened, it is still a less than proper image. Christ is not a viaduct that connects one land to another. In him our life is united with that of God. It is one soil, pervaded by the same humus and called to produce the same fruits: and this, despite a thousand resistances and toxic infiltrations that one might encounter.

Incarnation not only means that God appears in the world’s space, addresses a word to it and acts in it, but moreover he establishes with the creature a closer union than one can possibly imagine. The Son, assuming human nature in the unity of his existence, welcomes the creature into divine life. Of course this nature is of absolute purity; but the eternal Son presents himself as Redeemer, and the entire existence of Christ is built on the category of the ‘for us.’ Sin becomes his own, not as an action done by him, but as a guilt he accepts, representing us vicariously.”¹⁰

In the theology of the Incarnation, a large space is occupied by the years that Jesus lived as an anonymous citizen of Nazareth. These years represent the overwhelming majority of the time he spent among us. The human and the divine have the ability to merge into the *unicum* that is the personality of the Redeemer. This is done in silence and celebration, in sickness and in health, in prayer and in work, favoring that slow and gradual mixture that is proper to everyday life. It happens especially in listening: that which Jesus exercises with respect to his family, his neighbors, the patrons of the shop in Nazareth and, at the same time, in intimate and growing dialogue with the Father.

If in Christ, the human and the divine meet, many things change in the life of the believer. I limit myself to highlighting two of them.

⁹ SENDLER, E., *L'icona...*, op. cit., 144.

¹⁰ GUARDINI, R., *Libertà, grazia e destino [Liberty, grace and destiny]*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2009⁴, 283-284.

The first concerns the sense of history. *“The history of Jesus is the full manifestation of the dependability of God”* (*Lumen fidei*, 15). First, because it is a “beautiful, good, and happy” life that we see told in the human story of Jesus. It is truly worthwhile to be human, if you are like Jesus. In Him we see – as in a mirror – our vocation fully realized. This is not an abstract image, neither too high nor too distant, unreachable in the sky as well as in the sea (cf. Dt 30:11-14).

The same faith does not become a moment separated from life, limited to the frequent reception of the sacraments. *“The light of faith is incarnate light, which proceeds from the luminous life of Jesus”* (*Lumen fidei*, 34). It is itself part of the human experience. Each story becomes fascinating, precisely because it is open to this search, the potential for goodness, beauty, and happiness. If a Jewish proverb says that God created man because he likes stories, then among the many lives that come and go here on earth, we Christians have *“the most beautiful story ever told”*, the one to which all others ought to pay attention: Christ the prototype of the new man. Even a non-believer has a story to tell, as long as he lives this story as a search, and also as a journey: never closing himself to the light of the gospel that might come to him. On the other hand, *“whoever sets off on the way to practice good already approaches God”* (*Lumen fidei*, 36).

Starting with the incarnation, the second reality that changes is with regard to the sense of providence. No one like Paul of Tarsus said it so succinctly: *“all things work together for the good of those who love God”* (Rom 8:28). To believe in providence means recognizing what happened with creation “and even more visibly” in redemption. God has united his destiny to ours. Normally, human relationships are marked by limitation, by exclusion: *you can come this far, but here begins that which belongs to me*. Only love upsets these parameters. Becoming flesh, God has made the boundary posts jump. That which is ours interests him.

This fact also disrupts our way of considering destiny. Without love it is only blind fate, anonymous, the eldest son of randomness, a distant relative of chaos. In creation that culminates in redemption things apparently seem to always remain in their place, events seem the same as always. But in Christ they find a new point on which they can rely: the unfailing love of the Father. Our idea of God somehow “objectifies” itself in Jesus, the epiphany of the invisible God. And since we now know, we believe that God is the first one interested in seeing everything work together for the good: provided that we open ourselves to His Word not only as a consolation, but also as a task to be done.

For the Redemptorist mission

Our icon recalls three of the four pillars that support the spirituality of the incarnation in St. Alphonsus: *Birth, Passion, Eucharist and Mary*. But these pillars are in turn part of a single mystery, which cannot be divided or dissected.

For this reason, the incarnation for us Redemptorists means first and foremost love of the gospel. The story of this mystery is in those pages. Our vocation is there.

We Redemptorists give our lives for the gospel because we are convinced that it is worth it. Those who have the same opportunity that we have had, to leaf through and to gaze at those pages, encounter what they need most: a new meaning for their existence. If then – thanks also to one of the traits of our missionary charism – they do not stop reading but allow themselves to be attracted by a dynamism of love regarding the person of Christ, they will in turn ardently desire to tell others. Because *“at the beginning of being Christian there is no ethical choice or lofty idea, but rather the encounter with an event, a Person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction”* (*Deus Caritas est*, 1).

Incarnation means another important thing for us professed Redemptorists, who somehow inspire lay people and other consecrated people who share our vocation. I mean the apostolic life *“which comprises at one and the same time a life specially dedicated to God and a life of missionary work”* (Const. 1). It is one of the keys to understanding our Constitutions and Statutes. It is a brilliant way to reflect on history, the working days of Jesus with his search for the face of God. It is the union of the human with the divine. It is the power that channels our energies, all of them, beginning with the most

intimate and “spiritual,” toward the mission. It is the center of gravity for our thoughts, our study, our plans. And we know that the mission is the place where we become saints, and where we in our turn are exposed and disposed to being evangelized, especially by those who in the gospel find their hope and their bread: the abandoned poor. Because the poor are our “guardians” as we read the Word, they are the ones to teach us “*that strength is found in community and in relationships (...) and they help us already by the simple fact of being there: they are faces and names, not reducible to theories or statistics*” (*Communicanda 3 [2009], 84.88*).

The sense of providence is also part of our DNA. To conform oneself to the will of God, for St. Alphonsus, is part of this reading of history, but it does not remain something purely internal, it is expressed in deeds and in a calm confidence before them. For example, “the difficult work of the new foundations was experienced by Liguori, with particular attention to the decrees of Divine Providence. The possibilities that suddenly open up are understood as invitations and God’s encouragement, the defeats endured with courage and submission, as an expression of the will of the Lord who is full of goodness. What is amazing is the conviction of Alphonsus that the vicissitudes of life are not the result of a blind fate or the effect of human decisions, good or bad, but that in these is revealed the mysterious divine plan, oftentimes obscure to human eyes.”¹¹

Incarnation, for us Redemptorists, also means to keep in mind what General Statute 023 asks of us: “The members ... should give particular attention to the study of moral and pastoral theology and spirituality as required by the character of the Congregation and taking example from its history.” It is beautiful and meaningful that such important disciplines be put together: spirituality and morality. Recalling here in particular, even before the duty of reflection, the teaching and research carried out by the Alphonsian Academy, the urgency of finding the guiding principle of Alphonsian moral theology: that which unites the moral choice to the paschal mystery, the “Practice of the Love Jesus Christ” and “Moral theology,” the “Law of Christ” to the authentic freedom of the children of God. From here, the enormous task of the education of the conscience, “that human sanctuary where a person is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths” (*Gaudium et spes*, 16).

As Redemptorists, we relate very closely to the words of Benedict XVI: “In this our time, to correctly form the conscience of believers undoubtedly constitutes one of the pastoral priorities.”¹² And again: “It is necessary to return to the confessional as a place in which to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation, but also as a place to ‘inhabit’ more often, so that the faithful might find mercy, counsel and comfort, to feel themselves loved and understood by God and experience the presence of divine mercy beside the Real Presence in the Eucharist.”¹³

Finally, the incarnation for us Redemptorists means to remind ourselves that the human has already been redeemed by Christ and is just waiting to be transformed (cf. Const. 6). It is “to strive to encounter the Lord where he is already present and at work in his own mysterious way” (Const. 7), to determine “whether to proclaim Christ explicitly, or confine themselves to the silent witness of brotherly presence” (Const. 8). It is to open oneself to those “seeds of the Word” that God continues to spread in the ideas that circulate, in the creativity of some businessmen who are not resigned to the crisis, in the strength of spirit of some and the heroic suffering of others. The incarnation is the music played by several instruments, like those listed in Constitution 9: virtues such as “patience, prudence and confidence,” “becoming a neighbor to everyone,” “prayer,” “sincere service to others,” “the witness of life, in whatever form it may take.” It is in this way that we “gradually prepare the ways of the Lord” and “truly exercise our Redemptorist missionary vocation” (Const. 9).

¹¹ KOTÍNSKI, M., *La volontà di Dio nell'esperienza spirituale di Alfonso Maria de Liguori [The will of God in the spiritual experience of Alphonsus Mary Liguori]*, in *Spicilegium Historicum CSSR*, 54 (2006), 346.

¹² BENEDICT XVI, *Message to His Eminence, Cardinal James Francis Stafford, Major Penitentiary, and to the participants of the twentieth edition of the course for the internal forum, sponsored by the Apostolic Penitentiary*, March 12, 2009.

¹³ BENEDICT XVI, *Speech to the participants of the XXI course on the internal forum organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary*, March 11, 2010.

2. Passion

Contemplating the Icon

The Lady of Perpetual Help is part of the iconographic tradition of the *Virgin of the Passion*. The objects exhibited by the archangels Michael and Gabriel tell us this. A jar with a reed in it, the sponge and the lance in the hands of the first, and the cross and the nails in the hands of the second attract our gaze and make us find ourselves again with the Redeemer on Calvary.

The gaze of the baby Jesus is toward the cross. But it seems to go beyond. It is a bewildered look, proper to one who collides with the uncertainty of suffering and irreversibility of one's own destiny. Maybe he is looking for what it means for him to do the Father's will. Or he looks with hope to the final, glorious end of his passion.

Here, too, we encounter the colors. Despite the predominance of blue, red is what attracts our eye. We find it in the inner tunic (*khitōn*) of Mary, on the band encircling the waist of Jesus, on the mantle of Gabriel and in the tunic of Michael. Iconographers tell us that red refers to the final suffering of Jesus. To indicate this color "*we find in Hebrew terminology a series of expressions that are derivatives of the word blood [dām],*" and on the other hand we know that in Jewish thinking "blood" is tantamount to life.¹⁴ It is also said that the cloak that the soldiers made Jesus put on after they stripped him was scarlet (Mt 27:28), and red is the color that iconography ordinarily reserves to martyrs.

Green also has something to say. It attracts our attention away from Jesus' tunic belted with the red sash, and from that of Gabriel, but we also see it in Mary's head covering and in the lapel of her cloak. It is a symbol of growth, fertility, hope. Sometimes it is very useful for complementing other colors and harmonizing an arrangement. But when it is combined with red – the sash that surrounds the baby in our Icon – it recalls the sacrifice of the martyrs through the flourishing of the years.¹⁵

Together with the believing people

By the very fact that He created us, God has made our destiny his own. Creation is already a passion, said Simone Weil. We have become the destiny of God. If this communion is already evident *in the incarnation*, then it is on Calvary that it is exposed to uncertainty and to tragedy. The Father's will, Jesus' lifelong food, bends to the perverse human will. It is at this point that, by fate, destiny becomes redemption.

There are aspects of this mystery of Christ that continue to speak even in our distracted times. If today many complain about losing the compass of reference for their actions, if we are all witnesses of "truth gone mad," not least in this babel of messages and opinions, two points seem to not be up for discussion, simply because they cannot be. The first is love. From songs to films, from novels to internet forums, from philosophical debates to simple interpersonal dialogues, everyone seems to be in agreement that you cannot live without love. And if it is permissible to identify a meaning for human life, it is in love that one need look for it.

The other point, alas, also indisputable, is death. As it had a beginning, so our life will have an end. Violent or natural, announced or sudden, because of illness or age, it will arrive. However – just the opposite of love – we do not want to think about it, it will arrive unexpectedly, "*at an hour we least expect it*" (Mt 24:44), because for those who keep the flame of human love alive, it always comes too soon. The "*sein zum tode,*" as Heidegger would say, or to be doomed to death as Saint Paul would say more simply (Rm 8:6) is the shadow that accompanies us: and any attempt to remove it just doubles the thickness.

¹⁴ SENDLER, E., *op. cit.*, 147.

¹⁵ Cf. SENDLER, E., *op. cit.*, 149-150.

Well, in Christ, God and perfect man, these two points not only exist, but are intimately connected. Christ gave his life for his friends (Jn 15:13), because he linked his fate to the truth that he incarnated and preached. He could have fled or withdrawn. He did not do it, because only by giving his life would he be able to say how seriously God loves us. For this reason the cross remains the absolute, unsurpassed symbol, which even at the crossroads of sufferings and losses it continues to speak of hope.

Lumen Fidei has said: “contemplating Christ’s union with the Father, even in the moment of greatest suffering on the cross (cf. Mk 15:34), the Christian learns to participate in the gaze of Jesus himself. Even death is illuminated and can be seen as the last call of faith, the ultimate ‘Go forth from your land’ (Gn 12:1), the last ‘Come!’ pronounced by the Father, when we hand ourselves over with the confidence that He will make us firm even in the definitive step”(n. 56).

And still: “to the one who suffers, God does not give reasons that explain everything, but offers an answer in the form of a presence that accompanies, of a history of good that unites itself to every history of suffering in order to open in it a passage of light” (n. 57).

There are these certainties, proper to faith, that also join love and death in the life of the believer. It is this certainty, of being loved at such a dear price, which makes life “*great and full*” (*Lumen fidei*, 4). The martyrs, seeds of Christians, are there to tell us that God can be trusted.

But we can trust God even when we experience the passion in our lives. Here, too, the meaning of the word can be twofold: not only the already mentioned “to be for death,” but also the price we pay if we want to live this life itself “*great and full*.” Well, it is enough to listen to the cry of the poor; it is enough to bump into each other with our inconsistencies to see how this “*great and full*” life is constantly threatened. Not simply nor only by the faults of others. If we look at our distorted and possessive way of loving, if we go back to the “lack of love” that we have often experienced in our childhood and which continues to alienate us, if we seriously consider the *mysterium iniquitatis* that surrounds us and is within us, we also feel a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. We measure ourselves with a sense of poverty that can only burst into a cry for help, after we are brought to our knees.

Only by entering into this mystery of sin, can we ignite the passion of those called to preach plentiful redemption.

For the Redemptorist mission

In Latin languages we have the same word, *passion*, to indicate two different realities, which in the case of Jesus are intimately related to one another: and so also should they remain for the believer, and in the first place for the missionary.

The first reality has to do with the bloody end of Jesus, his “hour,” the one in which the glory of God will be revealed in the face of human arrogance. The passion understood as atrocious suffering, the somber striking of hammers and nails, blood poured out, hands wide open to make an offering of the world. This first meaning of the term is at the root of the stripped down crucifix, painted by St. Alphonsus in 1719, copies of which accompanied the missionary preaching from the beginning.

The second reality is the passion understood as “burning fire” that Jesus longed to make burn (Lk 12:49). It is enthusiasm in the etymological sense of the word, proper to one who lives in God (*en theou*) and is inclined to do only his will. It is the zeal that leads one to not waste time and talents. It is the courage of the prophets. It is, in summary, the reason that led Alphonsus Liguori to formulate several times, between the end of 1732 and the first months of 1733, the vow of the founder – at the price of remaining alone – and to establish a new missionary group in the Church.

What space does the Virgin of the Passion open to us? I will limit myself to emphasize two lines of commitment that I think are particularly urgent.

The first appeal is to prophecy. It is one of the themes echoed so often in the years since the Council as to appear worn and abused. It is associated with passion because somehow it responds to the truth of what Leonardo Boff says, “no prophet of the past or the present has died a natural death.” And the fact that in recent years the combined number of blessed Redemptorist martyrs has exceeded that of the other saints and blessed is an eloquent challenge for all of us.

If you will allow me a parenthesis, we should all learn to use with extreme caution the word “martyrdom” both in the basic sense of prophetic witness, and the extreme sense of a bloody death. It is a word too easy to use, but on the skin of one who doesn’t actually see a looming threat. The risk of rhetoric is at hand.¹⁶ From 2001 to 2011 there were more than 280 missionaries (priests, religious and laity) who died a violent death. These men and women have also tested their fear of death, right on a par with Jesus (Mk 14:33). And like them, even today many missionaries are wondering whether to stay or leave: although many choose to stay to be close to their people. In any case, martyrdom is scary and cannot be the object of theories.

In light of these realistic considerations, it must indeed be said that prophecy is more within the reach of people than institutions. Among these last, it is easier for the newer foundations, born with concrete and often radical life models, even though exposed to risks. In the case of Congregations and Orders that were born before the Council, the gospel finds an additional confirmation, when speaking about *new patches that rip old clothes* (Mk 2:21).

Nevertheless, beyond these fears and findings, we continue to call “prophets” people, lay or consecrated, who in our time have made resonate within the Church and in the world a different word, against the current, which still challenges men and women of good will. There are even institutions on this wavelength. And in any case, Pope Francis, meeting with the Superiors General in November 2013, indicated prophecy as the priority *par excellence* of the consecrated life in the world today.¹⁷

I believe prophecy is accessible, as well as mandatory, even for the Redemptorist mission today. In the first place we should try to be *alternatives* in what we are and say. “*Wake up the world! be witnesses of a different way to do, to act, to live,*”¹⁸ Pope Bergoglio says to each of us. We should think concretely about places, experiences and ways to help people reflect, interpret reality and discuss the values of modernity with a critical sense, so that they might choose consciously, with patience but also perseverance, to live differently. A balanced use of media and social networks, an ecological lifestyle, a search for the essential and protection from the ephemeral, to overcome the anonymity of the big city, to be attentive to the poorest: these and other needs move people’s lives, remaining however, in the absence of adequate pedagogical paths, in a state of wishful thinking. We often do not have easy recipes to offer. However, it is a matter of helping people find inner freedom again, to be “*masters of their own soul,*” offering places for discussion and reflection.

It is important, however, that these things are not only “we say” to you, but that we are credible prophets primarily by *who we are*. Today it becomes more and more evident the specific style that is expected of the consecrated life. It is precisely the style of the Beatitudes, which means ongoing conversion to meekness, to the true encounter with the other, wonder at the uniqueness of every life, a constant sense of gratitude in the face of *Plentiful Redemption*. Our vows are nothing more than the embodiment of this style: with the freedom of those who are liberated every day from the commercial

¹⁶ What is said here about prophecy and martyrdom can somehow also be applied to all those words in our everyday vocabulary that have been made the subject of easy rhetoric, and now pay the price in terms of wear and tear. I think of words like “witness,” “theology on your knees,” “communion,” even “contemplation,” etc., that in our real life no longer make sense, unless you make a continuous effort to make them adhere to reality. It’s a risk run not only by religious vocabulary but also the secular, because of the “liquidity” of our culture. Cf. CAROFIGLIO, G., *La manomissione delle parole [The falsification of the words]*, Rizzoli, Milan 2010.

¹⁷ FRANCIS, “*Svegliate il mondo!*”, *Colloquio con i Superiori Generali [Wake up the world! Interview with the Superiors General]*, November 29, 2013 in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 2014, I, 3-17 (n. 3925).

¹⁸ FRANCIS, “*Svegliate il mondo!*”, *cit.*, *ibid.*

mentality that invalidates relationships today. In a world where everyone knows the price of everything, but no one knows the value of anything.

The second appeal that comes to us from the Virgin of the Passion is to incarnate the passion for life that inspired the days of Jesus on this earth. This passion also speaks the language of the prophets, in an age of sad passions or of weak thinking, where it is easier to get excited about a rock concert than about a common cause.

Under so many aspects, in passion we find a keyword for our future. *“Religious life is attractive when it is a life lived by passionate people and a passionate life.”*¹⁹ Beyond the moralism and sense of guilt that these words can evoke, a critical and constructive sense can help us understand how to be significant, especially in the eyes of young people who are seeking their vocation.

Anyone who wants to live with passion today has to hold two threads in their hands. The first is *the beauty of life*: which means life as such, regardless of the noise that often kills the sense of wonder. A life that is free from the manipulations that enslave it. Life as a gift received and a gift to be given. Life that is savored in silence, in contact with nature, expanding the lungs, and simply saying “thank you” for the fact of being here in this world. Life as a possibility.

The other thread that ignites passion is *indignation*. It’s what overwhelms us when we see life trampled, raped, subjugated by power games and the intertwining of structures. The outrage that grabs us when we read history with the God’s eyes, the eyes of the child Jesus who scrutinizes the cross, the serious look of Mary who seems to read in our hearts the thirst for power and possessions.

“I know of only one authority that cannot be revoked by any explanation or emancipation: the authority of those who suffer,” said the German theologian Johann Baptist Metz, dialoguing with Elie Wiesel, survivor of the Holocaust and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize.²⁰ The authority of those who suffer is the same as that before which bowed the God of Jesus Christ. It is the same as that to which we will give an account, when we will be asked to account for a glass of cool water either denied or refused. It is the authority that speaks to us in the intimate sanctuary of the conscience, if only we will not plug our ears and close our eyes.

Before the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, we must also remember to pray that God might grant us politicians who are conscious of their “high calling”, “capable of entering into genuine dialogue that will find a way to effectively heal the deep roots and not just the appearance of the evils of our world” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 205).

This passion for life and for those who suffer is translated as **zeal** in the Redemptorist vocabulary. This word is used ten times in our Constitutions, to the point of being one of the key words for reading them correctly. We are not recognized in the Church by the forms of our apostolate, but rather by our willingness to move our tents when the most abandoned people call for our service (cf. Const. 14).

Above all *restructuring* means this; here is its success or its failure. And when, for various reasons, we must continue to be in a certain place, it is essential that we incarnate this tension, that is, that we give concrete form to it, involving lay people and telling them clearly what we mean by the abandoned, how and where to reach them in the territory of our competency or in that of the diocese, and reminding them of our *“reason for existing in the Church”* and *“the badge of our fidelity to the vocation we have received”*: that is to say, *“the preference for situations where there is urgent pastoral need, that is, for evangelization in the strict sense together with the choice in favor of the poor”* (Const. 5).

Also in this case, we could become discouraged when confronted by the limits of age and resources. Nevertheless, missionary zeal must never be lacking, because we become missionaries by

¹⁹ LAVIGNE, J. C., *Perché abbiamo la vita in abbondanza [So that they may have life in abundance]*, Qiqajon, Bose 2013, 386.

²⁰ METZ, J. B. – WIESELE, E., *A pesar de todo [Despite everything]*, Trotta, Madrid 1996, 42.

means of our profession, and we remain missionaries whether engaged in different activities of the apostolic ministry or hindered from working at all; when we are occupied with various services on behalf of the Congregation or the confreres, or when we become old and sick, finally accepting even to suffer and die for the salvation of the world (cf. Const. 55).

Finally, it is right that when contemplating the Icon of the Virgin of the Passion we should learn how to understand the mystery of our own death. It is beautiful and true what Fr. Durrwell says: “the Redemptorist will have worked a lot in his life. However, he knows that there still remains a great work for him to accomplish (...), it remains for him to die with Christ for the salvation of the world. If he happened to be negligent in his work, he knows that a last grace is reserved for him, where the failures of the past can be compensated: God will give him the grace to continue Christ the Savior by dying in communion with him.”²¹

3. Tenderness

Contemplating the Icon

With the third word that guides us in this reflection, passion becomes compassion, the continuation of the *kenosis* that occurred in Jesus Christ.

The Lady of Perpetual Help sends a message of tenderness in what many consider the **center** of the Icon, as it is what first draws their attention: the right hand of Mary to which both hands of the Child Jesus cling.²² If a journey backwards in time has already made us glimpse in the Lady of Perpetual Help the *Hodigitria* who with the hands points to Jesus, today those same hands speak to us of tenderness. With this gaze we can also go back to the archetype of the *Eleusa*, even if in this last iconographic tradition the gazes of Mary and Jesus meet, unlike what happens in our Icon.

Gripping hands, Mary and Jesus attest to having in common the same fate of passion and death, but it also tells us that the Father’s love will not fail. One reads tenderness on the face of Mary directed toward those who pray to her. It is the gaze of one who is aware of how suffering and the painful unknowns of life are so familiar to human existence.

None of the four characters smiles. Mary and Jesus strike us with their seriousness. They seem to tell us that tenderness is not expressed with the joy of the external facade or with sentimental words. Tenderness is expressed in deeds, by sharing the destiny of others. Even when this destiny is sad, as happens to a good part of humanity.

Mary’s gazes towards us and that of Jesus toward his destiny of passion draw a circle that involves us in a mystery of compassion. This was Jesus’ way of looking, as the gospels tell us, called to become the same one with which we look at people: the gaze that knows how to glimpse the victim in the one who usually is classified as guilty.

Together with the believing people

Thanks to Pope Francis, the “*revolution of tenderness*,” the firstborn consequence of the incarnation (see *Evangelii gaudium*, 88), has become a *locus theologicus*, among the most frequented in

²¹ DURRWELL, F. X., *Continuer le Christ sauveur par l’apostolat de l’annonce missionnaire [To continue Christ the Savior through the apostolate of missionary preaching]*, in *Spicilegium Historicum CSSR*, 35 (1986), 101.

²² According to Fabriciano Ferrero there are two “centers” that can be recognized in the Lady of Perpetual Help: the first is occupied by the hands of Jesus and his mother, the second by the face of Mary (or by the child if you look at the icon from the left): see FERRERO, F., *Santa Maria del Perpetuo Socorro. A icono de la Santa Madre de Dios, Virgen de la Pasión*, PS Editorial, Madrid 1994, 128.

the Church today. We are inclined to see it as a believer's way of acting, in a merciless world, or at least one traversed by the globalization of indifference (*Evangelii gaudium*, 54).

And in this sense the mother of Jesus has a decisive role: "every time we look to Mary, we believe again in the revolutionary power of tenderness and affection. In her we see that humility and tenderness are not virtues of the weak, but of the strong, who do not need to abuse others in order to feel strong" (*Evangelii gaudium*, 288).

Before being a lifestyle, however, tenderness is the indescribable experience of God's love.

Here is the basis for one of the key problems of Christianity today. Many leave the faith because they do not know what to do with the more or less boring practices, with the duties that have little or nothing to do with their daily lives. One cannot blame them. What is missing for these people is that intimate union with the Father that enlivened the days of Jesus and that only prayer can keep alive. They are missing the discovery of the treasure hidden in a field and the pearl of great price (Mt 13:44-46) with which Jesus described the indispensable charm of the Kingdom, the discovery that leads one to quickly sell everything just to acquire the field and the pearl. They are missing the affective dimension of Christian life, which in St. Alphonsus finds expression and nourishment in works such as *Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ, Visits to the Blessed Sacrament and the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Christmas Novena, Conformity to God's will, and The Way to converse continually and familiarly with God*, etc.

In reality, behind this problem there is another one, typical of our culture: the dissociation between faith and love. It is thought that love does not have much to do with the truth. As usual, there are philosophers who theorize or explain this common feeling of people. *Lumen fidei* cites Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), for whom "to believe" is equivalent "to falling in love." Just as the enthusiasm of being in love can be precarious and volatile, so the same can also happen with faith.

The encyclical thinks of it in a completely different way: "faith understands how much it is linked to love, while love itself brings light" (*Lumen fidei*, 26). "Love cannot be reduced to a feeling that comes and goes. It touches, yes, our affectivity, but so as to open us to the person loved and so begin a journey. It is then revealed in what sense the love needs truth. Only to the extent that it is based on truth can love endure over time, overcoming the ephemeral moment and standing firm to support a common journey (...). And if love needs truth, so too truth needs love" (*Lumen fidei*, 27).

It is in this regard that tenderness plays its decisive role. Only tenderness can scratch the hard core of the ego, only tenderness opens the way toward and with another. Only tenderness allows passion to become compassion. It is tenderness that opens life to *self-transcendence* and *gratuitousness*.

Overcoming the possible distortions to which this word is exposed today, the Christian looks to **Christ** as the *incarnate tenderness* of God: his existence designed entirely for others and at the same time geared to please the Father. He bends over to the one who was made bent over by a spirit (Lk 13:11), he is sensitive even to the one who touched his cloak (Lk 8:44-45), knows what is in each man (Jn 2:25), sits and listens without judgment (Jn 8:15), restores women's true dignity (Jn 4:1-42, Jn 8:3-11). But at the same time he does not make compromises with sin, denouncing the hypocrisies of structures and individuals (Mt 23:23), he puts people on their feet again so that they will be protagonists of their lives and walk with dignity (Lk 5:24). It is in light of his being "incarnate tenderness" that Jesus will warn about the enslaving yoke of the Pharisees (Mt 23:13) in order to propose himself as the way to follow: "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your life. For my yoke is indeed sweet and my burden is light" (Mt 11:28-30).

If it is true that Jesus "loved with a human heart" (*Gaudium et spes*, 22), learning from him we can love with the heart of God.

For our part, we perceive, however, that tenderness is demanding. We are called to purify the way we love, to give a full and mature meaning to chastity in every state of life, to define our very life as existence for others.

It is not easy. We run into the wounds of our personal history, and with others that affect the culture that surrounds us. Tenderness is called to become mature sentiment, without lapsing into sentimentality. It requires valuing the Marian principle of the spiritual life, which consists of receiving, listening, carrying in the womb and generating the Word. It demands learning from “Our Lady of Kindness” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 288). It commands us to take seriously the words of John Paul II: “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible to himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intensely in it” (*Redemptor hominis*, 10).

It is not an easy task to fully appreciate tenderness, because we run into a way of thinking and being Church. If already in the 70’s of the last century, the German writer Heinrich Böll had occasion to write: “Until now what has been missing among the messengers of Christianity, from all indications, is tenderness,”²³ we have to ask ourselves: How far have we come since then?

For the Redemptorist mission

“The apostolic form of life in common most effectively paves the way for pastoral charity” (Const. 21). It is this belief that makes “living in community and carrying out apostolic activity by means of the community,” the fundamental law of our lives (Const. 21).

Evangelical tenderness is a challenge to which the Redemptorist community must respond today. Nor should it appear to be a chimera [something that exists only in the imagination and is not possible in reality]. It is certainly is not, if compared to the “*fraternal communion of souls*” to which we are committed on the day of our profession (Const. 21).

The laborious, slow, and often discontinuous work of renewing consecrated life in the last fifty years has perhaps helped us to overcome certain fears and prejudices. Through the years we have all come to understand, at least in theory, that our “*perfect charity*” must also learn to be humble, simple and above all, true, beginning with “poor” attitudes such as listening, attention, interest in the work of others, mutual esteem (Const. 38), the effort of discernment done together, a space for common reflection on God’s word, the decision to take time to take care of the quality of our life (*Fraternal Life in Community*, 13), reminding ourselves that “*before being a human construct, religious community is a gift of the Spirit*” (*Fraternal Life in Community*, 8): and that therefore a protagonist’s role need somehow be given concretely to the **Spirit**.

The thermometer of tenderness is the attention we reserve in our communities for the elderly or for those confreres who, for health reasons, are unable to preach. We have already mentioned Constitution 55, which makes these confreres missionaries on a par with everyone else. It seems important to me to remember here what Fr. Durrwell says: “*these confreres are not always helped to understand their prominent place in the work of redemption. Christ has allowed himself to be penetrated by suffering, opening himself in this way to the infinite ocean of divine life, and allowing the fullness of the divine ‘to dwell bodily in him,’ so as to be poured out on the brothers (Cl 2:9-10). It is at this point that suffering participates in Plentiful Redemption.*”²⁴ It is on the labored steps of these confreres that the community should pattern its journey, so that they do not feel neglected or useless.

An apostolic community that allows itself to be shaped by tenderness and makes it the measurement of its relationships is “*in itself the liberating and prophetic proclamation of the gospel*” (*Communicanda* 11 [1988]). Tenderness is the antibiotic against the dichotomy that separates being from acting, what we preach to others and what we live, between the outside and the inside. In a world like ours, anxious to communicate but fearful of committing itself, a community that is inspired by evangelical tenderness is already on a mission, also making credible its vocational appeal. In fact, “*all the*

²³ BÖLL H., *Lettera a un giovane cattolico [Letter to a young catholic]*, La Locusta, Vicenza 1968, 54.

²⁴ Cf. DURRWELL, F. X., *Continuer le Christ sauveur par l’apostolat de l’annonce missionnaire*, in *Spicilegium Historicum CSSR*, 35 (1986), 100.

*fruitfulness of religious life depends on the quality of fraternal life in common.*²⁵ In the desert created by individualism today, a community inspired by tenderness is the school and the soul of the mission, as well as an indispensable treasure.

Central in this sense is the forgiveness that must permeate our relationships. How many forms the lack of forgiveness assumes in our communities! Rifts between some, resentment, indifference, simply enduring others, small and ill-concealed revenges ...: all signs that at the very least denounce a lack of interior freedom.

We must face our reality, not imitate the ostrich that puts its head in the sand. We must consider our communities as a place in which to learn to love and to forgive, as laboratories of communion. This is the first service we must offer the world.

It is precisely the case of making ours the cry of Pope Francis: *“Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of community!”* (*Evangelii gaudium*, 92).

But tenderness directly questions the very Redemptorist mission. In a world where “it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 53), tenderness helps the missionary to reach out to every single life he is gifted to meet. “In a culture paradoxically suffering from anonymity and at the same time obsessed with the details of other people’s lives, shamelessly given over to morbid curiosity, the Church must look more closely and sympathetically at others whenever necessary” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 169).

We need to find the personal dimension in pastoral relationships. Today, the person has to be put in a position to ask him or herself “What does the gospel mean to me?”, “What does faith mean to me?”, and to respond in a credible manner.

We too sometimes allow ourselves to be caught up in the logic of the “audience”. A church more or less crowded, a mission more or less well-attended is a source of satisfaction or disappointment. The mission inaugurated by Jesus had other claims: *“where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in their midst”* (Mt 18:20). Our concern should not be to fill a church, but that Christ be in our midst, even if we are only two or three; that Christ purify the criteria by which people live, and helps them in a real maturation process, even if slowly. Something comes before catechetical texts, theological orthodoxy and moral norms. People must be able to enter into direct contact with the gospel, be put in a position to know and love Jesus Christ and learn to live by his Spirit.

The attention that St. Alphonsus has reserved for this dimension of ministry is expressed in different ways. From the *Evening Chapels* to the *Devout Life*, to the importance assigned to confession and spiritual direction, and finally to communities designed to be a “permanent mission,” we find in our tradition many elements that inspire and provoke. At the heart of this methodology was the response to some practical needs that people still live today, even if unaware of them or unable at times to formulate them: How to pray? How to fight distractions? How does one make an examination of conscience? How to approach a page of the gospel?

An important point that questions us daily is how to make our mission a place of healing. This is a direct expression of tenderness. The horizon that correctly interprets the word “healing” is the same as that surrounding the missionary activity of Jesus: it is the generous commitment to a healthy life, that which finds its enemies in legalism and hypocrisy, in the lack of truth within oneself, in fratricidal hatred, in fear and loneliness, and in the lack of trust in God. The repeated action of Jesus in healing the sick is a far deeper and more widespread sign of this work, that he then transmits to the disciples, making them healers, but even before, proclaimers: *“preach, saying that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons”* (Mt 10:7).

In this regard we have many experiences in the world. Not all have the real and proper therapeutic charism. Although, however, this dimension is often associated with devotion to Our Lady of

²⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Alla plenaria della Congregazione per gli Istituti di vita consacrata e Società di vita apostolica [To the plenary session of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life]*, November 21, 1992.

Perpetual Help. People entrust to a note the pain that makes them suffer and a “thank you” for being touched and healed, placing it at the feet of the Virgin, waiting for it to be read in church. Others are content to stand in line, wait for the missionary to take their head in his hands and impart a healing blessing.

For its part, *Evangelii gaudium* warns us: “Today, our challenge is ... the need to respond adequately to many peoples’ thirst for God, lest they try to satisfy it with alienating solutions or with a disembodied Jesus who demands nothing of us with regard to others. Unless these people find in the Church a spirituality which can offer healing and liberation, and fill them with life and peace, while at the same time summoning them to fraternal communion and missionary fruitfulness, they will end up by being taken in by solutions which neither make life truly human nor give glory to God.” (n. 89). And Benedict XVI: “Healing is an essential dimension of the apostolic mission, of Christian faith in general.”²⁶

There are urgent needs that question the Redemptorist, always involved in a redemption that reaches “*the whole man*” (Const. 6). Great work awaits us. We must remind ourselves that the conversion of which we are “apostles” (Const. 11) and to which we must lead people “with strength and gentleness” (Const. 11) has two aspects.

The first is certainly the openness to the truth and to the action of the Spirit, because these regenerate us. But the second is crossed by the unique paths of the each one’s personal story. A story often marked by wounds that today still condition our YES to Jesus Christ, to love and to the management of our own freedom. A story marked by an alienated and often distorted way of loving. A story in which “to be reconciled” is not simply a question of good will. To ignore or neglect this aspect makes our call to conversion sterile.

It is this type of attention that enlivens a ministry thought of as “personal accompaniment.” *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 169 to 174, describes its method and its qualities. Here I would like to also highlight those tools that can and should also help someone to walk alone: tools such as silence, thought therapy, breath control, the “Jesus Prayer,” enhancement of the senses, meditation, verification of the image of God, fasting therapy, spirituality of the journey, returning to one’s roots, the writing of a diary and the exercise of awareness are just a few possible examples.

Tenderness can and should be a reference, a style, a constant search for new and old ways to love. The Lady of Perpetual Help with her hands that support and hold tight, can generate and implore this gift for our communities and for our mission. To her we gather with “filial tenderness” (Const. 32), confident that this sentiment changes our way of being and acting.

4. Redemption

Contemplating the Icon

Redemption coincides essentially with the paschal mystery of Christ. We have already highlighted the painful side of the passion. Here we want to dwell on its **glorious** aspect.

At first glance, the Lady of Perpetual Help seems like the theological and spiritual work of St. Alphonsus as a whole: among so many elements, the space reserved for the resurrection seems nil. We understand why this happens in the works of Liguori: he remains within Anselm’s view of redemption as expiation, where the cross extends its longest shadow.²⁷ To this vision Alphonsus brings an extraordinary

²⁶ BENEDETTO XVI, *Gesù di Nazareth. Da Betlemme alla trasfigurazione [Jesus of Nazareth. From Bethlehem to the Transfiguration]*, Rizzoli, Milan 2007, 210. Benedetto XVI also cites Eugen Biser, for whom Christianity is a “therapeutic religion”, a healing religion.

²⁷ It is interesting what emerges from the terminological frequency in the Alphonsian works: the word “risen” shows up 31 times, “resurrection” 146; “Easter” 139; “Cross” 1,739; “Crosses” 159; “Crucified” 563; “Death” 6,051 (source: <http://www.intratext.com/BAI>).

corrective, that of love. The motive for the sacrifice on Calvary is not justice, nor the need to appease the wrath of God, but love. Nevertheless, even for him the cross remains the absolute symbol of this love as, on the other hand, it has been for millennia of Christian civilization.

In all honesty, we must remember, however, that Alphonsus lives on the existential side of the resurrection: the Christ still present in history, who acts from the tabernacle and through prayer, watching over the believer's conscience and palpitating in love.

But the question remains: are there elements in the Icon announcing glory and hope?

It is Fabriciano Ferrero who reminds us of a typical feature of the Cretan-Venetian iconographic school: the symbols of the passion that we find in the hands of the archangels Michael and Gabriel are the same that appear in the *icons of the resurrection/anastasis*. In this tradition this makes the theme of the Virgin of the Passion refer to the glorious suffering of Christ.²⁸

For the same Ferrero, the four-pointed **star**, located to the left on the veil of the Virgin, is a reference to the Trinity,²⁹ where the risen Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father.

In addition, as we have seen, accompanying the gaze of the child Jesus toward the instruments of the Passion, we can go **further** with him, into the light of the "third day of Easter." It is there that we seek a response to the many sorrows of the world.

But also in this case, the **colors** are the most obvious symbols. Despite the difference in interpretations, the golden background is a reminder of divine light.³⁰ Its function in Byzantine icons is to create "a uniform and infinite space like the heavens that contains all things."³¹ More than color, "gold is light and splendor: if the colors live by the light, gold is itself active light, irradiation."³² Therefore, "the gold is found everywhere that participation in the life of God is expressed, especially in the halos, but also on the clothes, the sacred vessels and the Book of the Gospels. Christ's garments are frequently covered with gold filigree (*assists*), a symbol of his divinity."³³ In the case of our Icon, the same streaks – or *assists* – of Mary's veil are golden.

The eyes of one who contemplates the Icon, if only they are attracted by grace, manage to make that "way of seeing" (*Lumen fidei*, 30) mentioned above. The believer finds himself right in the heart of his questions, in the vortex of suffering and in the shadow of doubts. And right there he meets the face of Mary and that of Christ, who are not sad as they might appear at first sight. They are faces that seize you in sadness but lead you toward peace; they find you in the night and take you to the joyful light of the resurrection.

Together with the believing people

Redemption is the fourth and last word we have adopted as an arrow indicator for our journey together with the Lady of Perpetual Help.

It is the word which indicates the place of the Redemptorists in the Church, but it is also that which more than all the others calls them into question.

Communicanda 2 (2006) a few years ago put its finger on the wound: redemption is a word that sounds meaningless to many of our contemporaries. Today we can say: unfortunately it is not the only one. Words like grace, justification, salvation and providence appear as empty shells, relics of a bygone age. As if that were not enough, these are top accusations against a Christianity that in the past had

²⁸ FERRERO, F., *Santa Maria del Perpetuo Socorro. Un icono...* op. cit., 102.

²⁹ FERRERO, F., *Icon of Perpetual Help in Lexicon of Redemptorist Spirituality* (ed. Sean Wales e Dennis Billy), General Secretariat for Redemptorist Spirituality, Rome 2011, 145.

³⁰ SENDLER E., *L'icona immagine dell'invisibile*, op. cit., 160.

³¹ SENDLER E. *L'icona immagine dell'invisibile*, op. cit., 136.

³² SENDLER E. *L'icona immagine dell'invisibile*, op. cit., 161.

³³ SENDLER E. *L'icona immagine dell'invisibile*, op. cit., ibid.

dispensed people from the responsibility incumbent upon them, projecting into a hypothetical beyond their desires for happiness and dispensing with their efforts to construct and transform *this* world.

And on the other hand, what place is there for redemption or grace today, in a world that relies almost exclusively on reason, on the desire to dominate, on political consultation, on technology?

We know, or at least we perceive, that this question does not call into question our sense of guilt or an unjustified inferiority complex vis-à-vis the world. We know, we feel that it reminds us of the *faith that works* (He 4:12), to the *word that lives* (Ac 7:38, 1Pt 1:23). We must not forget that – the question of whether or not he was the Messiah – the Christ answered only by listing the facts: “*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the Gospel is announced to the poor*” (Mt 11:4-5).

It is interesting to note that in the gospels Jesus Christ uses the word love but a few times, with related words. When he does it is to remind us that this commandment is the “first of all” (Mk 12:28-33). On the other hand, it is much more frequent that he speaks of glasses of water, of clothing for the naked, strangers to be welcomed, visits to those in prison (Mt 25:31-46), the poor to be fed (Mk 8:1-9 and parallels), the sick to be healed (Mk 6:5).

It is this concrete nature of faith that brings us back to the range of vocabulary that Scripture uses to speak of redemption. The words it uses are those of everyday life, those connected to suffering and injustice, in order to tell the world that our existence is not yet saved: diseases, courts, prisons, slander, betrayals, wars, poverty, hunger. These are the thousand faces of a life that cries out for salvation.

This feeling of alienation, proper to one who is at the mercy of a dark power, which changes its face a thousand times and yet looms ominously over the life of the righteous, has to do not only with the spiritual dimension and our interiority, but with our whole, concrete reality.

If the passing of the centuries, pursuing the categories of the supernatural, has ended up making this cry for salvation almost evanescent, we might just say at the service of that alienation we want to avoid, if we want to speak about redemption today, it is to the whole, entire person that we must look.

Humans today are victims of how many and what alienations? Are not the “*princes of this world*” increasing (Ep 6:12), those who manipulate and manage life, ending by increasing injustice, spiritual dispossession, poverty and drugs of every kind? Do we not already have enough evidence from recent history – from Nazism to Communism, from world wars to the more current savage capitalism – to confirm for us that humans alone cannot save themselves? Does not all this confirm for us that humankind is constituted by a “cry for redemption,” even if we underestimate the word and continue clutching the straws of our own finitude?

It is characteristic of our time to make resonate, more imperiously than ever, the good news of salvation by grace, the possibility of beginning a new history in one’s own life, and with this a new path of hope in the world.

It is characteristic of our time to find again the courage to say that only in the gospel and beginning with conversion of the heart is there true liberty: that freedom that – we have to recognize it with the same courage – has often made the preachers of the gospel and the hierarchy fearful. That freedom which for centuries has constituted a nuisance for the Church: it is enough to recall the figure of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoevsky.

It is characteristic of our time to recall that the root of all slavery is sin, the source of alienation, before all else, from oneself: the space where the sinner is taken to harden and close in on himself, generating fear with respect to others, considered antagonistic to his own happiness.

It is characteristic our time to recall that redeemed existence has only one, unequivocal face: that of joy. It is the attitude of one who knows that the most important things in life – from the body we have received to the air we breathe – are a gift. It is the attitude of one who does not take himself too seriously, and then gives just the right space to humor.

It is characteristic of our time to recognize that in the course of history Christians have acted like one of the sons in the parable of Mt 21:28-32: the one who promises to go but does not, contenting himself with his words and his own justice, equal to that of the scribes and Pharisees, thus permitting the tax collectors and prostitutes to pass them by.

It is characteristic of our time to announce redemption as following the way of Jesus, which tends to become life in Jesus, and which guards itself against the insidious traps of that kind of religion that tends to justify itself, by itself.

For the Redemptorist mission

By giving us the Icon of the Lady of Perpetual Help, Pope Pius IX entrusted us with devotion to Mary, the first to be redeemed. With the help of this Icon, we can and must always remind – first ourselves and then others – that redemption consists in the close, tender, passionate relationship with Jesus Christ.

Strong in this relationship, we can better perceive the appeal of redemption in the many forms that reach us: the appeal to which we must respond by “*drinking from our well*,” the aforementioned *Communicanda 2* (2006) warned us. This does not only mean taking to heart the basic categories with which Alphonsus “rethinks” redemption: the person of the Redeemer rather than the act; the love rather than the vicarious expiation, the *kenosis* of a God who made himself close, etc. It also means the impassioned proclamation of mercy, sensitivity to the poor, pastoral availability, popular language, friendliness, programming times for the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, etc.: to summarize, that “*instinctive and pastoral way of understanding and announcing redemption*” (*Communicanda 2* [2006], 10) that characterizes our service in the Church.

It means to have a sincere appreciation for popular piety, beginning with that which is expressed in the sanctuaries/shrines, and to appreciate all of its potential. Even though the ministry of sanctuaries/shrines is not contemplated in our Constitutions and Statutes, it is *de facto* one of the priorities of the Congregation; and we must thank God, because if there is an industry today that knows no crisis, it is tourism, even religious tourism, and within it the pilgrimage. Nor can we say that the pastoral care of sanctuaries/shrines would be a regression from the original charism: two of our first four houses (Deliceto and Materdomini) were sanctuaries/shrines, places of popular piety.

For its part, this last consideration is an invaluable aid to rediscovering that simplicity that we often and willingly neglect, and this forgetfulness ends up putting us in the realm of pure ideas, making us incomprehensible to the people (*Evangelii gaudium*, 23).

Popular piety is also an opportunity to be evangelized by the poor. “Simple people always have room to house the mystery. Perhaps we have reduced our speaking of the mystery to a rational explanation; for the people, however, the mystery enters through the heart. In the homes of the poor God always finds a place.”³⁴

Redemptorists exercise the instinctive and pastoral way of understanding and announcing redemption, “interpreting with fraternal solidarity the problems that beset men” and trying “to discern in them the true signs of the presence or the plan of God” (Const. 19). In today’s global world we are required to be on guard against that superficiality which often prevails in communication in general: where “they say” is favored, and a “copy and paste” attitude nourishes indifference and encourages the masters of the moment, who strongly desire that people do not think for themselves. But in a global world we are also asked to make our voice heard as a Congregation in the Church and in the world. Not necessarily the only voice that presumes to interpret everything, but a presence that expresses our specific charism.

³⁴ FRANCIS, *Meeting with the Brazilian bishops*, July 27, 2013, 1.

Redemption questions us, in the first place, as persons and as a community. It is one more reason why this word calls us into question. It is a sort of accounting that history is asking of us at this time.

At least in the so-called countries with a Christian tradition, starting with Europe, it is as if people were wanting to shake off the religious institution. The reasons for this occurring are the most varied: because one sees something contrary to life in the institution; it is identified with the law, even if only moral; it speaks an abstract language; its gestures and liturgies are now obsolete; the institution seems to want to justify itself alone, rather than putting itself at the service of the world, etc.

Here, too, we have to say: thank you, Lord, for calling us back to the true meaning of the gospel and of the Kingdom. Thanks for these merciless judgments of history.

In fact, as we well know, Jesus came precisely to dismantle the religion that is self-justifying. If the temple, the law and the liturgy lose their connection to life, they may be dangerously placed at the service of hypocrisy and human interests. This is what Pope Francis has repeatedly called *ideology* (*Evangelii gaudium*, 199). The same image, often used by him, of the Church behind closed doors (*Evangelii gaudium*, 47) describes the risk of ministry done as “homework”, as a duty, if not as a springboard for one’s career.

What is dear to Christ is new life in him. “*I came that they might have life and have it in abundance*” (Jn 10:10). If the world is asking anything of us today, it is exactly this. There is no other new evangelization but this: to demonstrate in our being, in our actions and in our preaching – with Gospel simplicity of life and language (Const. 20) – that we are redeemed. That we are “*his workmanship*” (Ep 2:10). There is no other evangelizer other than the saint. “*The Church does not grow by proselytism but ‘by attraction’*” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 14).

Alphonsus made the desire for holiness the *conditio sine qua non* for entering religious life³⁵ and consequently, for the action of the missionary: “the words of the confessor or the preacher will make little impression, if the listener has no idea that the one speaking to him is holy.”³⁶

But key to his missionary activity was to help people to walk on their own toward holiness. The main difficulties Alphonsus met in this regard were inside the Church itself: a Dominican theologian accused him, after the first edition of his “*Moral Theology*” (1746), not only of being an innovator in the moral field, but also of wanting to teach mental prayer to the poor. Unheard of! There was the hierarchy or the pastors to control the souls, to tell them how to access God, on a road almost exclusively marked by the sacraments. Was not this proposal of Alphonsus an indecent one?

What does all this involve ... it is open to a range of interpretations. These can also serve our self-justification. We can test the incisiveness of our presence and of our announcement: are we really able to help people live their lives more fully? Another test will not give us the right to fold our arms: because even if we should have a certain participation in our liturgies, missionary dynamism will always make us seek new initiatives and open new paths (Const. 15) in order to bring the gospel to every creature. Another test might appear even more demanding: can we pass on to young people the beauty of our life? This ultimate challenge has an epochal character and includes all the others; it goes beyond young people and we Redemptorists. At the end of a long historical *excursus* on religious life after the Council, an expert like Aquilino Bocos Merino said: “*The most negative thing about renewal did not or does not consist of that which is imperfect, but in the inability to make shine through and to promote the beauty of the gift we have received.*”³⁷

³⁵ ALPHONSUS DE LIGUORI, *Notices pertaining to religious life*, §2.

³⁶ ALPHONSUS DE LIGUORI, *Selva of preachable materials*, XII.

³⁷ BOCOS MERINO, A., *Un racconto dello Spirito. La vita religiosa nel post-concilio [A story of the Spirit. Religious life in the post-conciliar era]*, EDB, Bologna 2013, 139.

To identify what specifically prevents this beauty from coming out, I think is the challenge of religious life in the immediate future, granting we are able to deal with it. Obviously to identify it will only be the first step. May the Lord guide us to the others.

CONCLUSION: A global Madonna

We have attempted an approach to capture the spiritual, pastoral and missionary message of the Icon. Obviously, it is only one of many possible approaches.

It would be interesting, for example, to understand as well the lesson from the story of the Icon. To better explain: I do think that ours is an Icon that was essentially “stolen”, stolen by a merchant before his trip to Italy. This is to say: God uses even sin to accomplish his plans – to arrive in the capital of Christendom, and from there spread throughout the world. And it’s also beautiful to see in this merchant a forerunner of our migrants.

Equally significant is that from the beginning the protagonists of the veneration have been lay people: besides the aforementioned merchant, the family who came into possession of it and the girl to whom Our Lady appeared in a dream so as not to be forgotten.

To these hardships we might add the serious “forgetfulness,” into which the Icon was forced by the fact of living with others more famous (today undoubtedly less in comparison with ours) at the Church of the Augustinians in Rome.

How this Icon has come to be with us then is a beautiful example of the logic of the gift made to us and through us to the Church. It is also an example of those initiatives that Pope Francis has linked to a verb from the Spanish language: *primerear* (*Evangeli gaudium*, 24) – the initiative of Fr. Michele Marchi (1829-1886), an ordinary Redemptorist, whom the chronicles describe as “*a man of common sense, barred from preaching, not having the talents for it.*”³⁸ He, hearing about the icon that was venerated in the ancient church of the Augustinians, but at that time was confined to a community chapel, solicited the paperwork which was then carried forward by the Rector of the General House, Fr. Edward Douglas (1819-1898), and by the Rector Major, Fr. Nicolas Mauron (1818-1893). This would lead to the Icon being entrusted to the Redemptorists by Pius IX.

In short, the history of this Icon alone already lends itself to describing God’s imagination.

But here, more than the first “deeds” of this Icon, I would like to highlight its current fate.

I have often read books or articles on the history of the icons. Those best known to the Christian people were accompanied by comments such as: “*a much venerated icon in Russia*”, “*an image made famous by this or that movie*”, “*a title dear to the Slavic peoples*”, “*an image very popular for its message of tenderness.*” By Our Lady of Perpetual Help I often found this comment: “*The devotion has spread throughout the world.*”³⁹ It is what we Redemptorists ourselves affirm, when speaking of “our” Icon. It is a type of TV spot, short but effective.

Yes, we can say with pride that ours is a global Madonna. We can be proud to have complied with the command of Pius IX: “make her known all over the world!”

We know that the real reason why this is Icon is so well known is because of our presence on all five continents, in 78 countries, in the midst of so many diverse cultures. Here too there is a motive that our look is called to embrace: we think of so many Redemptorist Fathers and Brothers, students and novices in formation and lay people who have made this “miracle” possible. We think of the many channels the Redemptorists have used: the popular missions, the perpetual novena, the folkloristic traditions, music, painting, pilgrimages, and more recently, social networks and web pages. We also

³⁸ BUSCHI, E., *Santa Maria del Perpetuo Soccorso [Holy Mary of Perpetual Help]*, Città Bianca, Veroli 1968, 166.

³⁹ Thus and especially GHARIB, G., *Icone, in Nuovo Dizionario di Mariologia [Icon, in the New Dictionary of Mariology]* (edited by Fiores, S. – Meo, S.), Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo 1985, 676.

think of the splendid basilicas, sanctuaries/shrines and welcome centers erected in honor of the Lady of Perpetual Help.

Yes, ours is a global Madonna, and today we have confirmation in a fact: above all in Asia, it happens that before this Icon people stop, not only Christians, but also Hindus and Muslims. I dare to think that through the message of this Icon even atheists and agnostics are put to questioning.

Ours is a global Madonna because popular devotion has made her so. It is certainly not its artistic value that has earned her this title: if it depended on this, then there are many other masterpieces in the history of Marian iconography that would deserve this title. The decisive point is that everywhere in the world people have like found themselves in this Icon, ending with “adopting her”.

On the other hand, we have already seen in its DNA that our Icon has this potential opening to the world: it was created at an intersection of cultures, artistic traditions and spiritualities. It was created by collecting a theological heritage that preceded it, and treasuring it. This is not only a wonderful gift that has been made: it is also *a sign of a new world*, today’s global world where one in seven people lives outside his/her place of origin; a world where cultures meet, spiritualities compete, and we are left wondering what to do with the faith we have received as an inheritance. It is a world where Christ asks only that we emanate the abundance of his redemption.

In this sense our Icon also has a role: to make us rediscover the Christian life breathing with two lungs.

All of us experience today – in our own skin even before in our ministry – a Christian and consecrated life “short of breath.” We have a thousand more means than in the past for knowing and spreading the gospel, but we make it more tiresome to live it. We experience a constant grinding, because – as the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore has said – we chase after things that do not lead us anywhere. Our heart is more restless than ever, St. Augustine would say. On the one hand we see the good that we ought to do, but with respect to the time of St. Paul, we feel more seductive the evil we do not want to do. On the one hand, the mystery celebrated, on the other that which is no less dark in our lives, a reason for patience with ourselves, and compassion for others. The world of the unconscious, even though many specialists were determined to explore it, nonetheless continues to condition us: we are less free than we would desire to be. We also feel that the gap between technological progress and true development has become more and more disturbing. People’s spiritual strength seems unable to keep pace with progress made in other directions. As Josef Ratzinger has said: “Let us be honest: today there is a hypertrophy of the outer man and a worrisome weakening of his internal energy.”⁴⁰

We experience all this very concretely in prayer, already in that prior act common to the three major expressions of Christian prayer – *vocal prayer, meditation and contemplative prayer* – which is the recollection of the heart. While this has always been a challenge for the praying person, today we feel a thousand fragments of our crazy thoughts and of our heart explode even more violently, if only we decide to reserve time for God.

Commented [J1]:

The result of all this is much more familiar to us than we care to admit, that is, the risk of sliding into the “gray pragmatism of the daily life of the Church, in which everything apparently proceeds normally, while in reality faith wears out and degenerates into pettiness” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 83). Gradually, this pragmatism risks going too far, to make us lose “enthusiasm for the mission,” until we find ourselves “wrapped in paralyzing sloth” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 81).

Whoever lives the faith today, like those who have been called to proclaim the God of Jesus Christ during the mission, not only experience daily in their flesh these difficulties, but implore that the world – not just their intimate world – finds the necessary unity and harmony in the face of the challenges that afflict him.

We have adopted four words, among the many possibilities, as suggestions for designing this world:

⁴⁰ RATZINGER, J., *Fede, Verità, Tolleranza [Faith, Truth, Tolerance]*, Cantagalli, Siena 2003, 167.

- the incarnation proposes to us again the plan that God, from eternity, has for his creation, and which has been made visible in Christ;
- the passion reminds us at what price we have been bought: that of the silence on the cross, who shares our suffering;
- tenderness outlines the true measure of our relationships, if we want not only to feel it but to actually be brothers;
- redemption tells us that every day we can restart to build the world we dream.

And all this is entrusted into the hands of Mary. With her we can find that unity of the heart that anticipates global charity. Contemplating her and Jesus Christ in our Icon we can learn to breathe with two lungs, the eastern and the western.⁴¹ It is a school that challenges in a special way our Congregation, consisting of confreres from different rites.

It is not simply an ecumenical concern, or a spirituality that treasures two different theological and liturgical traditions. The third millennium requires that we make a synthesis of a two thousand year journey: learning from mistakes, but above all from their riches. From the East as well as from the West we must strive for a spiritual life understood as the gradual penetration of the Holy Spirit and of love into the whole person,⁴² aiming to fill in the chasm separating nature and grace, reason and faith, mind and heart, gnosis and charity, theology and contemplation, putting God more and more at the center of our lives.

It is a task beyond our strength. But the Mother of Jesus does not disdain the most difficult tasks, even when it comes to forcing the hand of her son Jesus as she did at Cana in Galilee (Jn 2:5). As for us Redemptorists, like Alphonsus Liguori and our other saints and blessed, taking her “*as a model and helper*” let us proceed with confidence “along the pilgrim path in faith, embracing with all our heart the saving will of God” (Const. 32). And all this, so that the world may believe (Jn 17:21).

(translated by Joe P. Dorcey c SSR)

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⁴¹ “You cannot breathe as Christians, I would say more, as Catholics, with only one lung; you must have two lungs, that is, the eastern and the western” (JOHN PAUL II, *Allocutio Lutetiae Parisiorum ad Christianos fratres a Sede Apostolica seiunctos habita*, May 31, 1980: AAS 72 [1980] 704). See also, JOHN PAUL II, *Discorso ai membri del Sacro Collegio e a tutti i collaboratori [Address to the members of the Sacred College and to all the collaborators (June 28, 1980)]*, 14.

⁴² RUPNIK MARKO, IVAN, *Dire l'uomo. I.: Persona, cultura della Pasqua [To tell the man. I. Person, Easter culture]*, Lipa, Rome 1996, 263.